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THE CHINAMAN SUDDENLY WHEELED AND FIRED TWO SHOTS.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "A SPORT IN SPECTACLES," "MAGIC
MIKE," "SOFT HAND SHARP," "HANDS
UP," "TWO COOL SPORTS," "CAP-
TAIN CUTSLEEVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GAME AT BRAD AWL.

"It's only old Daddy Bender frum Black Dam, an' he wouldn't hurt a mouse. Copperheads an' coal ile, no. Lemme in, ole man, an' I'll do yer good; now don't yer furgit it. An' don't make no more noise than you kin help, fur there's no tellin' jest who's who in Brad Awl; an' Howlin' Billy ain't got ther gripe he used ter hev. If they jist winked onct he'd pass in his chips. You hear me in thar, say?"

The ragged old bummer applied his ear to the door and was silent while he listened.

Without doubt they did hear him—whoever might be comprehended in the word “they.” There was audible the faint sound of whispering, and then the door opened suddenly, without a word of warning.

As Mr. Bender was hanging on to the knob with a gripe proportionate to his inability to stand upright he followed the opening door, lurching into the room with a suddenness that wound his feet up in a pretty tangle, and caused him to fall headlong to the floor.

There was no excitement about the catastrophe, though he struck the uncarpeted, rough boards with a noise that was sufficient, one would think, to startle the house.

On the contrary, he slowly rolled over on his back, holding his hands and feet up, in an awkward, deprecating way, while he leered at the other occupants of the room.

Howlin’ Billy Bender, of Black Dam was no tyro in the social system of the West, and probably for that reason he contemplated serenely the pistol bar el that lay in pretty accurate range for his head. The eyes of the gentleman behind it did not say shoot, so he waited for the question that he knew was bound to come.

“Ah, you rum-soaked villain, what do you want here? If I didn’t think you too drunk to be responsible for what you are doing I could blow your worthless brains out. Get up and march.”

“Easy, boss. No objections hev I ter git up; but when I me tale unfold mebbe you won’t be so anxious fur me ter march. Jest listen now.”

Billy Bender rose gradually to a sitting position, and laid hold of a neighboring chair.

He was no very handsome object to look at. He was ragged, battered, tattered and grizzly. His hair and beard were unkempt, matted, and heavily sprinkled with gray; his eyes were bleary, and the tobacco-stained mouth twitched nervously in his moments of greatest repose. Fortunately for him he had no enemies in Brad Awl; but on the other hand he had no known friends. By common consent he had been judged too worthless to have either. How he lived nobody knew; and nobody cared. When he had managed to wring in for sufficient drinks to be decently full he seemed perfectly happy; and for the rest of the time he retained an owl-like silence. That was the sort of man who had gained an entrance to the room where Doctor Gabriel Gordon and his daughter, Ianthe, had been conversing in low whispers.

The two were strangers in Brad Awl, though one citizen, Colonel Abner Thompson, claimed their acquaintance. He had met them at Glory Gulch, and by his glowing representations had done his best to lure them here, where he was a recognized power in the camp.

Why they should have come would have seemed a mystery to any one not familiar with the manner in which the most unsuitable men drift into such out-of-the-way sanctuaries, such latter-day white friars as was Brad Awl. When the craze gets on them they go the uttermost limit, without seeing the certainty of loss.

Unless Doctor Gabriel Gordon utterly belied his appearance it was certain, by every theory as to the eternal fitness of things, that he had no business in Brad Awl; but Colonel Thompson’s black eyes gleamed wickedly when this man with the downcast face, vacillating mouth and hesitating speech suddenly clapped a cold, tender, white hand into his own warm, sinewy one, and said that he would be there! And he scarcely knew how to reason with the sharp-eyed, handsome girl, who so outspokenly opposed the movement.

“Father,” she said, and the colonel held his breath while he listened, uncertain how best to meet her arguments. “Why should we go? I have followed you so far on this wild chase after immense fortune, and do not fear but I will follow you to the end; yet pause before you go further. You had enough, and both of us were happy. We have enough still. If you go further, who knows how it will end? Better to turn back now. When this insane desire for boundless wealth has a little spent its force, you will recognize what you will not admit now: that we have enough for a lifetime. Why should we risk ruin, and perhaps death?”

And in his mild, deprecating way, that could be as obstinate as death itself when he was in the wrong, the doctor waved his hand and answered:

“Very true—very true; but we will go.”

So they were here at Brad Awl, stopping at “The Ark,” and they had withdrawn for private conference when Howlin’ Billy, butt and bummer, tracked them down. No wonder then that the girl, with an imperious motion of her hand, exclaimed:

“Wait! I have followed you here, but it is with my eyes open. If you are blind to the sort of people you have thrust yourself among, I am not. This man means to give us a warning, and I say it may be worth something. Let him speak. He shall speak. Go on.”

“Certainly, my dear—certainly. Anything in reason; though what such a creature can say that will have any interest for you, is more than I can imagine.”

“Look yere, boss; don’t spread it on too thick. I’ve got ther best ov intershuns, but you kin rile even ole Billy Bender. If I warn’t square, would I be here? Say, now; answer me that.”

“When a man becomes as drunk as you are, he can be found almost anywhere, especially where he ought not to be. I think you had better get out.”

“Drunk? Drunk? Heavens! what yer givin’ me? I kin be weak, er weary, but ther ain’t enuf mountin-dew this side ov ther continent ter make Howlin’ William drunk.”

By this time the bummer was standing with his feet very wide apart and his eyes blinking with owl-like gravity, while the words dropped out in a thick whisper.

“Enough of that,” interposed Ianthe. “I want none of it here. Tell us your errand, and then go. I am tired with the long journey, and we have enough to say without listening to your nonsense.”

“Bizzness, bizzness, every time. That’s ther way I like ter hear it. But yer won’t give me away now, will yer?”

“If by that you mean that you want our promise not to betray your confidence, you have it, flat-footed. Speak.”

“An’ ye’r aware yer in Brad Awl—in ther Ark—in ther Ark, at Brad Awl?”

“There can hardly be any doubt of that. We still possess our reasoning faculties.”

“Thet’s it—thet’s it. Wal, unless yer hev more luck than ther averidge run ov tenderfoot pilgrims, you’ll stay thar—yes, you’ll stay thar. See?”

“Stay! Of course we’ll stay. That is what we came for.”

“But hole on, ole man, hole on. Yer don’t take it all in. They stay hyer a’cause they plant ‘em. You’ve stamps, coin, copperheads an’ coal ile—yes, an’ them are the kind they never let git away. They plants ‘em, yes.”

“Plant them; how do you mean?”

“Well, this yere burg are a clost corperashun. Thar’s a gang hyer—copperheads an’ coal ile, sich a gang! An’ sooner er later they skoot ‘em in. There’s Kunnel Thompson an’ a few more knows ther ropes, an’ hangs tergether, an’ they stand ‘em off sorter like; but it’s ther edge ov the’r teeth ez hez hold, an’ if the’r grip slips, it’s good-by, John! Ef yer hed bin wise yer never would ‘a’ come hyer; but now ye’r hyer, watch out, fur I tell yer it’s death ter stay hyer, an’ yer can’t git away.”

“Can’t git away? What do you mean?”

Ianthe was listening with strange earnestness to the battered old dead-beat. His words chimed in so with what she had just been saying, that they came like a distorted echo.

“Mebbe yer ain’t believin’ me, but they clean ‘em out hyer, an’ ef they try to skip, then Kunnel Coldsteel and his Lucky Seven ketches ‘em on ther back-track, cleans up the’r pockets, an’ cords up the’r stiffs in his private graveyard. That’s how they keep down ther rush. Nobody hears anything about Brad Awl, ‘cause nobody goes out. They kill ‘em fu’t.”

“But Colonel Thompson got out in spite of them all; and if nothing was heard of the place in the outside world, there would be no one to come to it. Your story will hardly hold water.”

“Water! Who ther thunder wants water at Brad Awl? They all drink whisky. But ez fur Kunnel Thompson, ‘thout sayin’ he ain’t a good man, he hez ter keep his mouth shut er they’d be crape on his door. They let him out now and then ter bring in ther victims. Oh, I tell yer, it’s an awful place. You’ve hearn about men ez would cut yer throat fur ten cents an’ steal a coffin ter throw in. Them men live hyer.”

“And so the gist of your argument is that we should leave town immediately. Now, tell me; who hires you to tell this yarn to induce me to go?”

Doctor Gordon spoke more sharply than usual, for he had protested from the first against listening to the maulders of the bummer, and from that standpoint it was not strange that the idea should suggest itself.

Bender’s face was a picture of virtuous indignation.

“Dyer think I’d work fur pay? I’d scorn ther acshun. Boss, I don’t want yer ter go.”

“Then what in Heaven’s name do you want?” said Ianthe bitterly.

“Aint I bin a-tellin’ yer? My ole side pards hez all went up ther flume, one way er another, an’ I want ter take yer in on ther ground floor. Ef me an’ you kin hitch hosses, you ter fu’nish capitl an’ me ter put in sixes an’ science, it might make a team ez c’ud pull through the slew. Ef somethin’ ain’t did I’ll starve, an’ you’ll git shot. Don’ say nothin’ more ter-night, onless yer wants ter loan me a quarter; but think on it, an’ when ye’r ready ter chip in send word ter Mad Mike’s an’ we’ll size up our hands.”

“And that is all? Well, I have listened to your farrago of lies until I am sick of myself. Now, go. I shall not speak again. I mean it.”

Doctor Gordon’s patience was at last exhaust-

ed. He put away the revolver and advanced with threatening countenance. One hand was outstretched while the other fist was drawn back as if to strike.

So thoroughly had his face been transformed that Billy Bender did not stand on the ceremony of his going, but went at once.

“So long, old fel’; an’ ef yer wants any odd jobs in my line I kin be heered ov at Mike’s.”

He even stepped briskly over the threshold, as Doctor Gordon’s foot missed its mark.

Then the door was banged shut behind him in an energetic way, and the doctor turned toward his daughter:

“I hope you are satisfied with the interview. We have wasted half an hour over a drunken vagabond who came in to borrow twenty-five cents. I am ashamed of myself and you.”

“You needn’t be, then. If that chap didn’t bring twice the worth of your money I’ll eat snakes. It was worth half a dollar, sure.”

The voice was a startling interruption. Up to that moment Doctor Gabriel had not the faintest suspicion that the conversation was being overheard. Now, as he looked in the direction the sound seemed to come from, he saw a face set in the upper part of the partition wall.

“Don’t be scared, doctor. It’s no ghost. They can’t afford to run the boards all the way up, and I cut a slit through the canvas and poked my nose in as I heard you two talking business. I’m a new-comer at Brad Awl, myself; but I’ll vouch fur it that Howlin’ Billy tells the truth. We’re in for it here, and we can’t get out.”

CHAPTER II.

ONE DOWN AND ANOTHER COME ON.

THE advent of the bummer calling himself Billy Bender had only been an event; but the coming of the gentleman in the wall was an exciting surprise to the two who had fancied themselves alone.

His explanation evolved a fact of which they had been entirely unsuspecting. The upper part of the partition wall was of muslin, and the inquisitive gentleman on the other side had coolly drawn his knife for a foot or more along the canvas, inserting his head through the aperture thus made.

It was a fresh, and by no means unhandsome face that the doctor saw; clean-shaven save for a long, dark mustache, and with a pair of bright, dark eyes flashing down on him through a pair of spectacles.

Nevertheless, neither Doctor Gordon nor his daughter took kindly to the intrusion.

“Don’t do it, doctor, don’t do it. I see you’re trying to make up your mind to something desperate; but my word on it, it won’t pay. I’m here to do you good, and when Deck Bright is caught doing anything that looks so low down as peeping into another man’s room, it’s because he has something on board. You need a friend mighty bad, and I swear I’ve a notion to catch right on.”

“You seem to have cheek enough for anything,” interposed Miss Ianthe; “but perhaps we may have something to say to that. Take yourself away before you find by experience that we have forcible reasons for not wanting anything to do with you.”

“Thank you, miss. I like to see a proper amount of delicacy in a lady; but Brad Awl has no use for a surplus of it. I can assure you if I didn’t want a little talk I wouldn’t have said a word in the first place. You see I saw you both when you came, and I felt an interest in the lambs that were dropping down here among the wolves. I said to myself, there’s a man I’d like to give a warning; and there’s a lady that had better be somewhere else; I’ll express my opinion when I get a chance.”

“And now that you have had a chance, you will certainly leave us to ourselves. It would be rank injustice to me that we should be involved in a difficulty the very first night of our arrival.”

“Bless your soul, miss, there will be no difficulty. If I didn’t think you were a reasonable creature, I would leave you to your fate; and, if I hadn’t something to say I wouldn’t have opened the conversation. In Brad Awl we don’t stick so closely to the forms of etiquette that are so charming in a higher scale of civilization. And first and foremost, I want to give you warning not to trust the judge. Mr. Bender is by no means as simple as he looks, though he’s not worth much without a head to manage him. This performance here was only the introductory overture—and I haven’t a reasonable doubt but that the whole programme that is to follow has been arranged by the gentleman of whom he was warning you, the redoubtable Colonel Coldsteel. Now that I’ve said my say, I am willing to go as the gentle William did. If you think you can keep your own cues the deal will be one turn short and you’ll never know it.”

Light and airy was the speaker; but his words were making an impression. Doctor Gordon noticed that this stranger knew how to place his words so that they would do the most good, and having gotten over the shock of his appearance was the more and more inclined to hear him to an ending, as Ianthe expressed her disapproba-

tion. The fact that he might have withdrawn undetected was proof enough that he was not acting as a spy.

Dr. Gordon spoke with all of the deliberation that had been so painful to Colonel Thompson when endeavoring to arouse his enthusiasm for the Brad Awl trip.

"I do not know but what you are worth listening to. My daughter forgets that that loafer excited her interest, and he certainly came in as questionable a guise, and with much the same warning. I believe you do not wish to intrude and that you are inclined to do us a friendly turn. Now, who are you; and what have you to propose?"

The man above laughed lightly.

"I'm just the man you want, though I wouldn't like to say it at large, fer you understand I'm here sort of incog. The boys used to call me Derringer Deck, and if this court knows herself she can shoot plumb center yet. For the rest—I'm proposing just about what Howlin' Billy did. If you want a side pard I'll take you in on the ground floor. And it's not from any particular love for you, either; but because it would suit my own hand tip top, A, number one."

"Derringer Deck?" said Ianthe, inquiringly, interested now, and curious.

"Yes, Derringer Deck, the man with the drop. They called me that because, in the old times, when I was on the loose, when I let go I always killed. I've been on the goody good line for a time, and it didn't work as well as I hoped for. Now I've got a little debt of gratitude to pay, and while I'm at work I may as well carry you two along. Ah!"

He ceased speaking suddenly, and Miss Gordon gave a little scream. Although the movement was concealed by the partition he had suddenly thrown up his hand over his shoulder, and the short, sharp crack of a Derringer rung through the room.

Right after he gave an exclamation of disgust.

"Ah, missed him by heavens! I'm getting rusty; and if that's the way I open out I'd better quit and go home."

The intense disgust in his tones, showed that his words had a meaning; though he had never turned his head to see the result of his shot.

"What is the significance of that, sir? Is it a signal? If all this talk is only a prelude to an attack, you may jot it down that when the rush comes you will not find us unprepared. I have your life in my hands now."

"I see you have. I'm wise in all such sorts of wiles, and if your practice is as good as your theory you could just riddle me as full of shot as a sieve has holes. But you're not going to do it. I'll bet beg money on it. The fact is some rascal was snooping around, and if I hadn't given him a hint he would have been crawling in on top of me. I don't reckon he heard very much, and I'd bet rocks my ball didn't go half an inch from his head."

Miss Ianthe removed her hand from the pocket of her dress, folded her arms, and walked away to the window, where she stood looking out into the darkness.

The doctor took up the conversation.

"If you really mean well, young man, you may be of use to me, and I would like to have some conversation with you. But just now be quiet and fall back. That pistol-shot of yours will be apt to draw attention in this direction, even if the man at whom you say you fired does not come again. Give things time to cool off and then come around here, when we will have an opportunity to talk a little more at our ease."

"Don't fret yourself about any such nonsense. You wouldn't scare up a crowd here if you let off a whole battery of Gatling guns. They're used to it, you see. And if you want to talk to me it's got to be done now. I've business around at Mad Mike's somewhere in this next half-hour, and it won't do to put it off."

"Come then, I suppose there will be no more intruders, for a time, at least, unless they drop through the ceiling, or come up through the floor. And if there are, whose business is it if I choose to have a little private and confidential discourse?"

"Correct you are. I'll be there in a minute."

The head was withdrawn, and the doctor seated himself on the edge of the bed to await the entrance of his newly-made acquaintance.

It did not take long waiting either. The door opened, and Derringer Deck entered, with a light, pantherish step.

He was by no means a typical Western man. His clothing was of the neat and practical kind that combine style and wear, and would not have been out of place in a crowded city, save for the broad-brimmed hat and navy blue flannel-shirt with its broad, rolling collar.

"Shake, old man!"

Bright extended his hand, as he advanced; and it was taken in a gripe that was far stronger than he had expected, though his own was like iron.

"You'll do," he said, lightly. "After a shake I have a man pretty well sized up. You may not know much about mines and mining; but I wouldn't wonder if you were solid to the bone. Now no more nonsense. Cut loose. Pro-

pel. If you've anything to say, say it quick, before I have to leave you. What in the name of wonder did you bring her here for? It's bad enough for a full-blown man; but for a rosebud of a woman it's almost certain death."

"She came to take care of me," responded Doctor Gabriel, and there was just a shade of bitterness in his tone. "I am not to be trusted alone."

Then his voice changed again.

"No. I'll take that back. I won't malign her, even to a stranger. We two have never been separated, and I hope we never shall be. Where one goes you will find the other. Man never had such a daughter before; and I was a brute to bring her here."

"That goes without saying. What did you do it for?"

"Because, when once I had given my word and my money to Abner Thompson I was not one to back out, or wait long to see where and what was my investment."

"And you gave him money to invest for you?"

"I did. I am not often mistaken in my judgment of men, and I decided that he was one I could trust."

"You haven't any idea yet, I suppose, of where the money went to?"

"Yes, to a certain extent. If I am not mistaken it purchased half of a claim known as the Early Joe claim. There was a bargain in it if half that was said was true. If it looks prosperous when I see it I have arranged to make further investments."

"The 'Early Joe' claim. Ah! Yes! Are you acquainted with the symptoms of paresis?"

"I—I'm not sure I understand you."

"Well, in plain English they call it softening of the brain. When you see Early Joe himself, and hear his claim that he never disposed of any share of his interest in the shaft that carries his name I think maybe you will understand me better."

"But Thompson had everything in shape, and certainly led me to believe it was a good investment."

"Oh, the investment is good enough. It's the realizing that brings the trouble in."

"But the colonel was recommended to me by men that ought to know, yet you would make him out a fraud of the first water. Is that your meaning?"

"I don't say that altogether, I only give you a wink to go slow; and after that you must judge for yourself. If you want to see Previous Joseph I can take you along to Mad Mike's and give you a chance to size him up."

"I would like to go," answered the doctor, after a momentary hesitation, "but will it be safe? For myself I do not care for risks, but I must remember Ianthe, and from the name of the place I should judge it was not one which a man would be likely to visit solely in the way of business."

"Perhaps not; but, as they are bound to kill you if you stay here, where's the difference? A day or two on or off the record will hardly count in the long run."

"Bless my soul, but this is very discouraging."

Doctor Gordon ran his fingers through his hair and looked up toward his daughter in a troubled way.

Doubtless she had heard what had been said; but she gave no sign.

"And yet," he continued, "I cannot believe the case is as desperate as you represent. To make sure of it I will go. Yes, I will go. In the absence of Colonel Thompson, who, I understand, is away in the mountains, I must have some one for guide and mentor, and you will do better than any I have seen. How soon shall we start, and what possible excuse can I have for visiting the place of this Mad Mike, as you call him?"

"No excuse is needed. We'll go in and take a drink."

He stopped speaking and wheeled suddenly. At the window Ianthe had given a cry.

"Look! Look!" she exclaimed. "They will kill him. The murdering brutes! They are after a single little, lone Chinaman."

"A Chinaman, did you say? Good glory! Think over it, old man. I'll see you later on."

And then the young man, without stopping to take a preliminary view of the affair that was exciting the interest of the young lady, rushed to the window, threw up the sash, and sprung hurriedly out.

CHAPTER III.

THE TALENTED TWINS.

DOCTOR GORDON knew sufficiently well the Pacific slope to be surprised that a man, like Derringer Deck presumably was, should feel so much interest in a Chinaman. He hurried to the side of his daughter and stared out.

"He went past but a minute ago," said Ianthe, pointing with her finger, "and I wondered to see him here. Out yonder three or four men threw themselves suddenly at him and dragged him away. You cannot see them now, and I suppose he is dead by this time. There's

little enough mercy shown anywhere to the Celestials, and Brad Awl can be no better than the average."

While the two looked, trying to pierce the shadows that lay beyond the line of light from a window on the opposite side of the street, they heard the sounds of two shots, one after the other. Then a little man came running toward them.

"Look! That is he!" exclaimed the girl. "He has got away from them. We had best stand back. If they shoot at him we are right in line for whatever misses him."

"It looks as though the shooting was from the other side," responded the doctor, as he gave a side step, to get out of range, yet still have an opportunity to see what was going on.

Not a very improbable suggestion that, since the man from the flowery land held a revolver in either hand, which he was flourishing as he ran. And right outside he halted suddenly, wheeled, and again fired two shots.

Then, while Ianthe gave a little cry, and Doctor Gordon drew her back by a quick grasp, the Chinaman thrust away his weapons, reached his hands up to the window-sill, and swung himself into the room.

"Hi-yah! We Waillo lounde ebley time. 'Melican man no hittee use, t'inkee take um stlap. Me shootee allee samee sport-way uppee. T'hen lun fu'st chop c'hoi, no doublee teamee in hissee. Jump in windee; what side my now can go? Eh, c'hoi?"

As such people run, the Celestial was by no means bad looking. He seemed little alarmed, and not at all confused. Having delivered his speech he shut the window down very quietly and then turned coolly to the two, who appeared to be uncertain what should be done in the premises.

He looked at the doctor, then at his daughter, and then back to the doctor again.

"Fats'ai, fats'ai, chop-chop; but what for you bling girley to Brad Awl? Him plenty bad placee. We Waillo look see Cunle Thompson no wait fo' flind, an' t'ink dat culio. Tell flind bette' no hab makee stop this side; bette' git up an' git. Cunle Thompson no good man, Brad Awl no hab got good man; allo allee samee lali-loong, t'ief mans. More bette' go' way, fitte fitee. Pillman no sabbe, eh, c'hoi?"

"No, I don't understand. How in the name of wonder do you know anything about Cunle Thompson and myself? There is something mysterious about that which goes beyond me. This is the third warning I have had from perfect strangers, all of whom seemed to know more or less about my affairs. Tell me, how came you to know that the colonel was expecting me?"

"Oh, We Waillo lounde allo time. Look see Pillman an' him daughte in Gloy Gulchee. Him want um chancee tellum what pidgin he inside. Godlum no t'inke plopa listen, alle lighty. We Waillo go look outee numpa wun. No wantchee see Dellinge Deck, him skip."

And skip he did, with a haste that bespoke a very earnest purpose. A step outside must have been his warning, for shortly after he had disappeared Bright came in, a good deal more leisurely than he had gone out.

"Blast the heathen, he took his own part well enough fer two, and I just had the pleasure of helping carry a pair of stiffs into Uncle Johnny's. I reckon no one saw him, and unless you want a hanging-bee, I wouldn't advise you to mention anything about the affair. Brad Awl don't want the heathen very much anyhow; and if they dropped to the game they might try to wring me into it—which would have a bad effect on the next census."

"But who was he—what is he doing here—why was he attacked—why should you take such an interest in the matter?"

Miss Gordon strung half a dozen questions together into one disjointed sentence, and seemed very much in earnest about it.

"Bless your soul, that sounds like a woman, now, don't it? There's room enough to talk for a week about that, and the quickest I can answer is to say: I don't know. You let John Chinaman alone and he won't bother you, and if the doctor is ready I'll take him along to Mad Mike's. It's time we were on the war-path if we want to get any scalps."

For a stranger the young man made himself very much at home, and took possession of the doctor in a cool, matter-of-fact way, that showed no fear of refusal.

Yet Doctor Gordon did hesitate, and look inquiringly at his daughter.

"Oh, go," said that young lady, answering more frankly than had perhaps been intended. "When you're at Brad Awl you must do as Brad Awls do. But before you start I would advise you to get your revolver out of the trunk and have this gentleman see that it is properly loaded. You may have a call to use it, and if so, it is best that it should be in working order."

"Man alive; you don't mean to say that you're not heeled? Right you were to bring the young lady along. You need a guardian. Get out the revolver by all means; and if you think you can find a place to carry them, come to my room and I'll lend you a couple more. There's

no telling the depth of fun we'll have before the close of the evening exercises."

"Thanks; but the one weapon will be enough, and as I will be more likely to shoot myself than any one else, I'm not very enthusiastic about taking that. Still, one must make a beginning sometime, and I may as well begin now. Ianthe, give me the key."

The trunk was a stout little "steamer trunk," and the doctor on opening it had to move its contents pretty thoroughly before the came to the weapon of which he was in search.

He handed it up to his mentor with hesitation, which bespoke laudable unfamiliarity, and waited for the verdict.

"That's all right. A good serviceable tool, ready for first class work. Glad to see you don't take any stock in these new-fangled, double-action affairs. Unless a man is cool as an iceberg he's apt to get mixed in his triggers and the other fellow takes the drop. Stick it in your boot, or sling it on your hip, and come on."

Like a dutiful daughter Miss Gordon stepped forward and girt it on the broad belt that supported the scabbard, having quite a unique effect as contrasted with his other clothes.

"You are certain you are not afraid to be left here alone?" said the doctor, still hesitating. "We may be gone for an hour or more."

"I am very certain. No one is going to trouble me. And if any one does, I have a revolver that is one of the new-fangled kind. You couldn't scare Mr. Bender with it; but if any one bothers me I shall shoot first and try to do the scaring afterward. If I wasn't quite such a stranger I would go along; but I suppose I can trust you to the care of this gentleman who rejoices in so brilliant a title as Derringer Deck."

"Without a doubt, miss," responded Bright, not at all disconcerted. "I see you are in no good humor, and I don't wonder; but believe me, I am very much your servant. If I don't return a good account of my stewardship I shall offer my head for a target. So long. We're going now."

With a careless nod Deck Bright threw open the door, and Gabriel Gordon followed close at his heels as he passed out.

On the street everything was as quiet as if there had been no shooting-match a few moments before. There were a number of people hurrying to and fro, but every one seemed intent on his own business, and paid no attention to the two strollers, who sauntered toward the big red light, quite at the end of the street, that hung over the entrance to the saloon and gambling-house known as "Mad Mike's."

There was one person just a little ahead of them who had the same point in view, and the doctor, up to the last moment, had an idea that the lithe little form striding on before them belonged to a youth of seventeen or thereabouts; but under the red light the youth stopped long enough to take a brief but searching glance up and down the street, and in that moment Doctor Gordon had a fair view of the lovely face of a handsome woman.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed. "Who is that?"

"Do you mean to say that this is the first time you have seen her?" replied Bright. "You ought to know your neighbors, and she is one. Laughing Lil, they call her, the angel of the Ark. She is a very fresh young lady, pert as they make 'em, and about twice as handsome. She thinks she can shoot, and maybe she can, but if I was she I think I'd keep out of such places as Mike's shebang. When a row opens there, some of 'em don't stop to inquire whether the dealer is a woman or not. They just plug at the bank. But there's no discount on her nerve. That handsome face of hers would wear a smile if the bottom had dropped out of all things and the world had come to an end."

"Then she is a gambler herself. My, my, how strange it seems that a woman with such a handsome face should be so thoroughly depraved."

"Drop that," interjected Derring Deck sharply. "Handsome is what handsome does. She's got a pretty face, and she's as square as a die. Between the two, the man that advances the theory of Laughing Lil's depravity had better bespeak a head-board and deposit collateral enough somewhere to insure a coffin. When the crowd gets through with him he'll be in need of both, if they can rake up enough pieces to plant; and you bet none of 'em would chip in to pay for the funeral. Now let's get in, or we'll be too late to catch my man."

The girl had pushed through the swinging-door while the two were lingering. When they followed in, she had already disappeared in the crowd.

"Don't worry," whispered Derring Deck, as he noted the dissatisfied look on the doctor's face. "If you're struck on the girl, she won't be hard to find. You can safely bet stamps that she's at the other end of the room, sitting behind the table with the box in her hand. Don't crowd the mourners, though. There's lots of things worth looking at here, and you can go talk to Laughing Lil when you can't do anything else."

Gabriel Gordon nodded and glanced around the room.

It was a long, low apartment, redolent with tobacco smoke and the fumes of bad whisky. On one side, not very far from the entrance, was the bar, around which a dozen men were grouped; while at the further end he could enjoy the view of the backs of a throng which, no doubt, faced the faro-table over which the girl dealer presided.

While he looked around him, he heard a roar of laughter from the dozen at the bar, and immediately afterward a coarse, loud voice:

"I tell yer all hyer I'm ther talented twin, jest let loose on ther rampage. When I drawr bre'th, all ther world jest snorts! No slouch be I, but the boss ov Brad Awl, an' don't yer furgit it. I kin hug harder, scratch deeper, bite sharper, buck heavier, an' shoot plumber-center than ary galoot ez stomps 'round on two legs. Oh, hold me while I shout! I'm Ananias Jawler, hyer fur blood an' ha'r. Whar's Derringer Deck?"

"Here you are, old man!" rung out a fresh, clear voice. "You're shouting my name, and I'm right in town, all dressed up. Now, what's the matter with you?"

Before Doctor Gordon could extend his hand to stay him, Derring Deck had slipped away from his side and stood facing a huge, beetling-browed man in a red flannel shirt, corduroy pants, and heavy, high-topped boots, who had been flourishing a revolver in either hand, and was not at all struck dumb by the sudden apparition.

CHAPTER IV.

SLUGGERS AND ANOTHER SLUGGER.

ANANIAS JAWLER, in fact, looked down upon the little man with some disgust.

"Great snakes!" he shouted, "you can't be Derring Deck. No! Why, blast my cats! ef ther sneakin' little runt don't wear spec's, an' him to be settin' up fur a sport! Git out, sonny, or I'll take yer over my knee an' give it to yer hot whar yer buzzom orten ter be."

"Don't promise the crowd too much fun," was the quick retort. "You may fall so far short that they won't laugh worth a cent. I heard you calling my name a bit ago, and you've got to say out your say, or eat dirt as I measure it. I'm at home; knock on the shutters."

"An' so you be ther cuss they call Deck Bright. Wal, I swear, I can't believe yer. Why, it would take a *man* ter git away with Sammy Jawler—eh? Oh! rock me, Susan. What's ther boy a-doin' now?"

In spite of his scornful words and mien, those that watched for the true inwardness of things got a glimpse of the fact that Jawler was not quite as careless as he pretended, and it was possible that he suspected Deck Bright of being better than he looked. If he did not at once turn the battery of his revolvers upon the smaller man, it might be because Derring Deck's hands reclined carelessly in his pockets. If he was as good as his reputation, that meant that he held the drop already.

But a sudden change had come over the tone of the braggart, his hands dropped to his side, while he stared at vacancy, the crowd roaring at the singular look on his face, as though it was part of the most ludicrous performance.

"Well, finish up, old man. Don't be at all bashful, but spit it out. I'll listen to what you've got to say, and take your straps off afterward. If you want a chance to talk, do it now. When I get through, it will be too late!"

Cool and cheerful was Mr. Bright, and he dropped his words out with a distinctness that certainly rendered them very clearly audible; yet Ananias never turned at their sound, or gave token that he heard them. Though his lips moved, the only sound that came from them was an indistinct murmur.

"Can't you speak?" continued Bright, sharply, after an instant's pause. "I've heard of you; a great, overgrown, slab-sided idiot, ravaging around here about what you were going to do with Deck Bright. Now you see him, are you too scared to talk? Or do you want something to stir you up and make your blood boil? If you do, I'll give it to you hot!"

The giant's tongue was loosened at last, but not, apparently, from the stinging address. His eyes still had the far-away look, and the words dropped mechanically from his lips.

"It's all right, Sammy. I hear you. I thort yer hed gone up ther flume, an' I swore I'd git even; but ef yer say it's all right, all right she are. I'm comin', Sammy, an' don't yer furgit it. Straight ez a string, an' snakes can't keep me back."

Perhaps this might only be a dodge to throw him off his guard.

So Derring Deck thought as he saw the revolvers thrust away, their muzzles never once turning in his direction. His own hands came up out of the pockets where they had been hiding, and he suddenly darted at the huge Hercules with an earnest ferocity that meant business.

And just at that moment the Hercules moved also.

"I'm coming, Sammy!" he shouted, more vehemently.

Then, with one prodigious bound, he went

crashing through the window, vanishing from sight in the midst of a jingle of broken glass, and a chorus of surprised disapprobation from the spectators.

Derring Deck had been partially in Jawler's way, though his fingers missed the gripe for which they darted. He was flung violently to one side by the momentum of the giant, and turned half around—though he faced about the instant he recovered his footing, and his hands dove into his side pockets as he turned, he was just too late to catch the last fleeting glimpse which the others had of his brawny antagonist.

Without an instant's hesitation, he gave a headlong spring and darted through the opening made by Jawler, leaving a little hush behind him. During the momentary lull that followed his exit, those left in the saloon could hear the scurrying of feet down the road, and there was no doubt but that Derring Deck was off in close pursuit.

What might take place out there in the darkness no one seemed much to care, though its possibilities furnished a theme for conversation during the next five minutes.

During this little interlude Doctor Gordon, after the first feeble attempt at interruption, had maintained a discreet silence. It was pretty evident that his guide was reckless of what might happen, and was as likely to embroil himself with the whole crowd as with the giant, who looked large enough alone to crush two or three such men as the little fellow in spectacles. So he stood and listened, with good cause for thankfulness that attention had been diverted from himself.

From what he heard he understood that both men were comparative strangers to the regular denizens of Brad Awl; Ananias more particularly so since he had only made his appearance there that afternoon, while Deck Bright had been stopping at the Ark for a week, and had found Mad Mike's the first night he struck the town. From the hints let fall it was pretty certain that he had been playing there with unusual nerve and luck, and it was generally supposed that he could take care of himself, though, as yet, he had made no record, and had not even been involved in a serious altercation.

"Oh, he's a sport from ther ground up," remarked one of the bystanders, as he filled his glass at the expense of a friend.

"Who's a sport?"

The question exploded in a surly tone, that seemed to come from a point right at Gabriel Gordon's shoulder.

"Ther leetle man with ther derringers," was the prompt answer.

"He jest hed blood in his eye, an' looked ez though he meant ter crawl all over that bag ov wind. An' hyer's money ez sez he kin do that very thing if he ketches up in ther foot-race."

"How d'yer know he hes derringers?" interrupted the same surly voice, once more. "He's a durned leetle blow-house, but he's steered clear ov me. I tell yer, when he tackles a man once, you'll see how quick his hackles'll drop. Don't try ter stuff me with sich lollipop. Yer make me tired."

"What's ther matter with you, Early Joe? Do you want ter start a racket, right hyer? Ef you do ther table's set, an' you know whar you kin git yer gruel. I ain't rubbin' in what I think on no man; but I'm thinkin' all ther same, an' if you don't like it you kin put up yer ante er jump ther game."

"That's plain talk, Jim Norris, an' jest ther kind I like ter hear; but, hedn't yer better keep yer linen on till yer know which way ye'r, crowdin'?" I only axed how yer know he hez derringers. I ain't a-keerin' fur ther durned leetle cuss. Ef he came my way I'd take him 'cross my knee an' break his back; you look mighty sharp you don't git served that way yerself."

"Maybe you'd like ter try it?" snarled Norris, in a peppery manner. There was no good blood between the two men, as Gabriel Gordon could plainly see; and he saw, too, that the bad men of Brad Awl were not so nearly a unit as he had been informed. Shrinking back still further he listened eagerly for the answer, while he looked from one to the other. He was only human, and he would have been a little more than that if he had not felt an interest in gauging the powers of the man with whom Deck Bright had so strongly hinted he would soon come in conflict.

"Go slow, Jimmy. Talk's cheap, an' I don't hev ter sound my bazoo in Brad Awl ter make 'em think I'm a man. Ef yer wants me ter try it shuck yerself ov yer tools an' stand up fur ther last time in yer life. Hyer's money that says I kin lick yer with one hand behind my back."

Early Joe had been sitting at a table at one end of the bar, and a little bit removed, where he was not in the way, yet convenient for purposes of irrigation. Opposite to him was a man with whom he had been having a struggle at draw, and from whom he had raked a pot just as Jawler went out of the window.

Now, with a sweeping movement of his arm, he drew together the coin that lay on the board, and pushed it toward Norris. There was quite

a little sum there; and the defiance, plain enough, was promptly answered.

"I'll raise you an even hundred anyhow, an' there's ther money ter talk fur me. Put up yer coin an' tools in an honest man's hand, and stand up to me fur a round ef yer dare."

Norris planked down upon the bar as he spoke a buckskin pouch, and a belt from which depended a knife and pistol.

In thus disarming himself he took his chances; but he knew his friends and the temper of Brad Awl very well, and scarcely believed that Early Joe would risk a shot at an unarmed man.

He was right, too. The other gave a short laugh as he rose slowly to his feet, displaying a frame of fine proportions.

"Ef yer mean that fur a back-down, Brad Awl don't take no such fling. An' ef ye think yer kin find a stakeholder that's what *you'd* call an honest man, trot him out. Any man hyer's good enough ter hold my rocks. They ain't gittin' away with Early Joseph, not very soon they ain't."

"Now you talk like a man. Ef you keep on, an' don't die too soon, folks will think you ain't a gas-house after all. Thar's *my* man. I never seen him afore; but I'll trust him fur all I'm worth. Put up er shut up."

He pointed straight at Doctor Gabriel Gordon as he spoke, and that gentleman shrunk back; but too late to evade the inquisitive eyes that were turned upon him from every side.

"I don't know him either, but he's ez good ez a better. Ef he tried he wouldn't run fur. Pass him out, you fellers, an stand by ter see fair play."

The doctor would have declined the honor thrust upon him; but some one gave him a shove, and before he well knew it he was standing at the center of the ring already formed, while into his unwilling hands was being thrust two belts and the stakes that were to depend on the impromptu prize fight.

"All right now, Jim Norris. It's go as you please an' fight ter a finish. We won't shake hands. Jest square yerself an' wade in."

Their coats thrown aside, their brawny arms upraised, the two men stepped toward each other, while the spectators pushed back into a ring, being reinforced by the crowd from the table at the further end of the room.

There was no great difference in either weight, height, or length of reach, and for a moment they sparred at each other with about equal grace, each feeling for an opening.

"Whoop! Philaloo! Begorra an' phat ther bloody hounds be yez afther? W'ud yez? An' Mike Mulloney away frum home? Tare an' oun's, sacre, caramba, nix-cum-arouse, howld me paddy, I'm kilt! Maledito!"

And with this string of expletives, ground out with full impartiality as to nationality, a new-comer, dashing through the swinging door like a whirlwind, sprung between the two, and catching the throat of a combatant in either hand slung the powerful men around as though they had been infants, hurling the one toward the door the other toward the window.

"Now, bad 'cess to yez, jist tell me phat yez mane by this. Sure an' it's Mike Mulloney's house ye'r in, an' ef there's to be any foightin' it's mesilf that's ter take a hand. An' itherwise jist go outside an' settle it wid yersilves, an' don't be puttin' yersilves inter thrubble in moi ranch. How ner ther bluddy blazes yer think Oi kin run a bank wid yez rhampin' round—an' a lady wid ther box at that? Go out wid yez, ef ye must foight and settle it in the darruk an' don't dishturb bizzness."

The two men so unceremoniously thrust aside were on their feet in an instant, glaring madly at the man, but from some feeling a great deal more potent than modesty they restrained their passions wondrously well. As Gabriel Gordon with their belts of weapons made the third corner of the triangle, in the center of which stood Mad Mike, the reason can be guessed at. Mulloney could pull and plug before they had two steps made.

By an evident effort Early Joe smoothed his face, and spoke in tolerably steady tones.

"That's so, Mike; but when a man gets fired up he ain't stoppin' ter think whether ther bank's runnin' er not. Beggin' yer pardon, ef you kin loan us a lantern or two we'll get to work outside, an' ef Jim Norris holds his end up you'll see the alfiredest riot two men ever started. There's money up on it and you may as well see the fun."

"A loight. Phat does yez want wid a loight? Ketch hould av one another an' foight it out. Sure an' if I set out me lanthers, an' one av ther b'yes plugged a hole through ther glass, who'd pay me when both av yez war corrupts? No more chin, now, but git. D'yez think Oi don't know phat's ther matter wid yez? an ye'r both t'arin' fools."

"Thank you, Mike, mebbe we are; we'll go outside and see."

Jim Norris's voice trembled a little, but otherwise he showed no signs of anger, and without a glance at either his antagonist or the unknown stake-holder he walked into the open air and took up his position facing the door, and just at the further side of the band of light that came through the broken window.

Early Joe, not quite so tractable, gave a glance at Mike Mulloney. If there had been a chance to take him off his guard the circus might have come off under cover.

But Mad Mike stood with his arms akimbo, his hands conveniently near to the belted weapons at his hips; and the man that could catch him napping would have to be preternaturally wide awake. With just that momentary hesitation Early Joe followed Jim Norris, while the crowd came streaming after.

CHAPTER V.

A WOMAN'S WARNING.

THE crowd went trooping out, but Doctor Gordon remained behind. So did the bartender, who rejoiced in the name of Rapid Johnny. So did Laughing Lil, who ran the bank, with a looker-out who did not care to desert the coin; and a half-animated bundle of rags in the corner, whose snoring could be heard in the hush that followed the evacuation.

The doctor's lingering had doubtless escaped notice from the fact that the coming of Mike Mulloney had turned the programme upside down, and diverted from him completely the attention that he had momentarily excited.

That was what he wanted.

Gabriel Gordon had as much curiosity as anybody, but he did not desire to be too far up toward the front in such a crowd as gathered at Mad Mike's until he knew more about its temper. This arrangement suited him very well. He moved toward the window, expecting to at least see something of the *fracas* from that coign of vantage, but just as he was getting into position he was startled at hearing his name called softly:

"Doctor! Doctor Gordon!"

He looked around sharply.

Laughing Lil had raised from her seat, and had her eyes fixed on him while she beckoned him with her finger.

As he hesitated she came toward him.

"Are you as mad as the rest of them?" she said, her low tones more earnest than the smile on her lips would have seemed to indicate.

"You have no business in Brad Awl; and least of all here. What wild folly induced you to come alone, and where, the moment you are really known, a dozen hands will be ready to strike at your life?"

"Pardon me, but, really—really—this interest in me, a perfect stranger, is—is rather overwhelming. How do you know who I am; and why this warning?"

"Precious little interest have I in *you*; but I cannot see your daughter in such deadly danger without at least a word of warning. If you are what you seem answer my question. You have no business here."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps not. But I did not come alone; and I thought that I should not fail to learn something of the place in which I have cast my lot. What mad freak caused Mr. Bright to embroil himself with that ruffian I cannot imagine; and since his sudden departure I have only remained because I could not get away."

"But you should not have come at all. I tell you, Mr. Gordon, you have enemies such as you little dream of; and I have reason to believe that the man who calls himself Bright is the worst of all. The man who keeps this place is an honest fiend; the rest out there are fiends without the honesty. Sooner or later it is intended to embroil you with Early Joe; but I am afraid there is even a deeper game than that, which may be carried out while you linger here."

"A game? I don't understand you. What do you mean?"

"Simply this. You are known to have wealth—money here, but more where you came from. You were inveigled here to be stripped; and it will be done in the most available way."

"But, bless my soul, what is this you are telling me? Why should you, the confederate of the worst elements of Brad Awl, reveal the plot? It—it looks as though you might want to gain my confidence for purposes of your own. Eh? Forgive me if I do you injustice."

"Have I not told you that it is not for you that I care, though I am not as bad as you think me? You are supposed to be a man, and ought to be able to fight your own way. But for your daughter I have the feeling that one woman should have for another. With all your shrewdness has it never struck you that Jawler and the sanctimonious-looking little scoundrel with whom you came hither might be in league. After the marked confidence you have placed in the latter what would be easier than for him to inveigle your daughter into his power. If you find that she has vanished when you return to the Ark blame only your own folly."

Without rose the snarl of two combatants engaged in a ferocious struggle, mingled with the subdued roar of the crowd. Within, Rapid Johnny and the capper were trying to see without abandoning their posts. The two, talking in low tones seemed in no danger of being either observed or overheard.

Yet the exclamation of Doctor Gordon as he heard of this possible danger was too loud for prudence.

"Why did you not say so sooner? Heavens! that is a danger I never thought of, and the only one I have not provided against. And I am waiting here! Thanks, a thousand thanks, whatever may be your motive. I *must* go now at any risk, but I believe I can slip away without being noticed. However I may find things at the Ark I will not forget this goodness of yours. What shall I do with the stakes? The victor must have his reward. Will you take them?"

"Thank you. For reasons you can hardly understand it is impossible for me to have anything to do with them."

"Right she are, boss, but Billy Bender are around; copperheads an' coal ile, yes! Ef he can't hold 'em they'll be a durned sight more slippy than the law allows. It's a post ov danger, but ter help a feller mortal in deestress ther jedge am hyar."

A pair of remarkably dirty hands were outstretched, and their owner was the identical hero of Black Dam who had intruded at the Ark in the earlier part of the evening. There was an avaricious twinkle in his eye, and the brass in his face was solid, and enough to make a fair-sized molten image.

If the doctor saw him he never gave a second look.

"To the victor belong the spoils. Tell them that I was called away suddenly, but will see them again. And I won't forget you for helping me in my trouble."

He dropped the stakes in Billy Bender's hands with reckless confidence, and turned again to the feminine gambler.

"One more favor. Help me out of this. I must go so that I will not have to pass through that crowd. They might hinder me, and there is no time for delay. Is there no other way out?"

"Yes. Come. This way. Make haste. Those hounds will tear each other to pieces, and that will whet the appetite of the rest for blood. Lose no time when once you leave here."

She drew him away by a light touch on his sleeve, and he followed her with eager haste.

They passed on to the further end of the room, going behind the now deserted table.

For the first time the doctor noticed a door there, in the corner of the wall.

This Laughing Lil opened, and the two darted out into the night, as a wild yell rose behind them.

"Oh-h-h! Ouch! Elijer fishbites don't! It's on'y ole Billy Bender, lookin' after yer interests. Whar, oh! whar would ye bin ef I hadn't bin 'round ter rake up ther sleepers? Thunder, don't!"

"They'll kill him, that's *one* satisfaction," laughed the woman in a tone that was cruelly unpleasant. "That will take up their time and give you a chance. You know the way now; lose no time."

"What! and leave a man to be murdered, for my fault? Never!"

With surprising suddenness the doctor wheeled, and in his hand he held a revolver. Through the closed door he could hear the circus in the room he had lately left; and badly as he had wanted to go, he now seemed twice as anxious to get back. Either he was a man of more nerve than he had had credit for, or he was sublimely ignorant of what a circus—a real, dyed-in-the-wool, double-action, old-fashioned circus at Mad Mike's really meant.

The woman stood in his way.

"Stop," she said. "If you go in there now I cannot help you; but that man I can save. I pledge you my word he shall come to no harm, after I once reach him. Think of Ianthe and be off."

The promise and the name of Ianthe turned the scale.

"And I pledge you my word that if he is harmed he shall be avenged, if I have to bring the whole United States army to see it done. I go."

He had already lost much valuable time. Always wanting to break away, he had lingered for this thing and that, as though only the strongest reasons could drive him. Now, with this threat on his lips, he darted off, and in a moment was lost to sight.

"Another fool made happy," muttered Laughing Lil, as she coolly opened the door and quietly and unobserved she slipped back into the house.

Doctor Gordon had no trouble in finding his way. He passed along the rear of the adjoint-house, but then turned and made for the street, running lightly and fleetly toward the Ark.

It only took a few moments to reach the hotel, and straight he went for the room in which he had left his daughter.

When he found the door open and the light extinguished, it seemed pretty certain that his worst fears were realized.

Hastily he struck a match and lit the lamp, that he found where he had left it.

The light revealed no sign. The door that connected with his daughter's room was open, and the room itself was also empty.

After one more hasty glance, the doctor wheeled and rushed away in search of the proprietor of the Ark.

And just outside he found him, showing the way to the man of all others he most wanted to see, Colonel Abner Thompson.

CHAPTER VI.
LOST, SAVED, AND A SHOT THROUGH A DOOR-WAY.

MISS GORDON was the most courageous of women, as her presence in Brad Awl testified, and she had no fears.

Yet it was not because she was ignorant of the peculiar dangers to which she and her father were liable. She had seen a good deal of life in mining-camps, and if hitherto she had not come directly in contact with its rougher side, she knew of its existence.

But the young lady had perfect confidence in herself, and a great deal in her father. An expert shot with the revolver, and in no way troubled with "nerves," she fancied that in a town the size of this she could fend off danger until such time as the better element should come to her protection.

She saw the doctor go away without the least concern, and would have been willing to accompany him if he had suggested that her company was desirable.

For some time after his departure she passed the time in reading.

Then she threw the book aside and withdrew to her own room, debating with herself whether or no it was best to retire. She was tired from her journey, and her eyelids were heavy, but she was anxious to hear what report the doctor would bring back.

Too sleepy to argue the matter fairly she made presently, a compromise, throwing herself upon her bed dressed as she was.

Then she was asleep, almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

How long she had slumbered she could not rightly guess; but she was awakened by a light rap on her door.

Instantly she was on her feet, her hand grasping her revolver, but her lips half-opened, gave no sound.

The rap was repeated. She knew, of course, that it was not Gabriel Gordon. He would have entered by the door of his own room; and would have been apt to have spoken.

"Who is it; and what is it?" she said, in clear untremulous tones.

"It is I, Derringer Deck."

The answer was somewhat smothered but the voice did not seem altogether unfamiliar.

"What is it that you want?"

"Hist! Speak lower. You need not open, but come nearer, so that I won't have to shout it to all creation. Don't be alarmed. There is no great harm done, and the best thing for you is to sleep soundly, if you can, until morning."

"How? What do you mean?"

"I thought it only right that you should know. You might have heard the racket at Mike's; and if so I knew you would be uneasy if you didn't hear some explanation, why your father failed to come back. That's what he thought, and he wanted me to come and tell you."

"Speak up, man. Don't be all night. I heard no racket. What was it about?"

"Well you see it was just the average night at Mulloney's. Mike himself was away or they would hardly have tried to double-bank a stranger the first time he showed up his nose. But we had an elegant time for a while, and the old gentleman worked his gun in a way I admire. You can find out the amount of damage done in the morning, when they count the stiffs; but meantime he has a ball in his shoulder, and I pulled him out and into Ante Pete's ranch. There's no use for two men to try to fight the town."

"What! Is he seriously harmed? Why did he not come at once to me?"

"That's just it. The gang were outside, and considerably off the track. He wasn't in order for a foot-race, which there would have been if he had showed his face, so I crawled out the back way, and slipped around to post you up. I'm going back now, and I'll tell him you're all right."

"No! Wait! I shall go with you. I am afraid you are not telling me the whole truth; and I must see for myself."

As she spoke she threw open the door.

The man on the outside could not repress a low, mocking laugh.

She heard that, and then an arm was thrown around her waist, a cloth was pressed against her mouth, stifling any outcry that she might have made, and without interruption or explanation she was carried bodily out into the open air.

Ianthe struggled of course; but it was to no purpose, and as she felt her senses deserting her, she recognized the effects if not the odor of chloroform.

Her captor was as prompt as he had been reckless.

Whoever he might be, it was certainly not Derringer Deck who had betrayed her; but a man of much heavier build, whose face was hidden by a veil of crape, and whose dress had no specially distinguishing marks.

He gave a low whistle, and then darted a few steps to where a horse was in waiting.

"Bettee finishee chop-chop. Muchee bobbely when Mike come that side. Good wind, good watee; We Waillo hab pidgin far side Blad Awl. 'Melican man come We Waillo no be loundee. Hi yah!"

"Dry up your accursed babbles!" answered the man, fiercely, as with Ianthe still over his shoulder he in some way flung himself upon the horse.

From under the animal's neck darted a slight form, which even in that uncertain light could easily be distinguished as belonging to a Chinaman.

"Allee lightee, Cunle Coldsteel. Me sabbe; git!"

The Chinaman disappeared in one direction, the horseman and his fair prize in another. As the latter clattered down the street, he could hear behind him the riot at Mad Mike's, and it seemed as though he was safe to get away without interruption.

In fact he had reached and passed beyond the last cluster of shanties that marked the further limits of Brad Awl, looking toward the mountain.

Then, up from the very ground, a figure seemed to rise, just as Miss Gordon, whose face had become uncovered, uttered something between a cry and a groan.

The abductor saw the figure and bent low in his saddle. On that side Miss Gordon hampered his arm or he might have taken a snap shot instead, even at the risk of striking where there was no need.

The figure was a dozen yards from the trail, and stood motionless as a stone until the horseman was directly abreast of him. Then his arm went up with a quick movement, there was a little whiff of flame, and a sharp report.

The effects of the shot were too exact for one to believe it a chance one; and too marvelous to believe that it was not. A bullet from a heavy derringer creased the running steed, which dropped as though hit in a more vital spot, pitching his double burden over his head.

"That's business, 'way up," laughed the marksman, as he bounded forward.

"When you're in Brad Awl shoot wherever you see a mark. You won't be far wrong. My spread-eagles have hardly all broken their necks. If they have—Hello!"

Ianthe had sprung to her feet, and her chance rescuer saw that he had at least brought down a woman.

It was not that fact, however, which caused his surprise, but another discovery.

"Heavens and earth, Miss Gordon, how do you come to be here?"

"Not of my own free will, you may be sure, Mr. Bright. Look out for yourself. This man professed to be one Derringer Deck, who went away from the Ark in company with my father. Believing him, I was off my guard for a moment, that was nearly fatal. Had you not come I can only guess what would have happened."

"I'm afraid you can't ever guess," responded Bright, looking anxiously down at the prostrate man.

"I think, however, you will be willing to heed my warning now. But who is he? I hope his neck is solid yet. We'll want a last dying speech and confession, before the boys send him over the range."

"Hush. Surely you would not murder him in cold blood! And from what little I know of 'the boys,' as you call them, the less they have to do with my affairs the better. Come. You have done me one great favor, grant me another. Take me away from here while this man is unconscious, and leave his punishment to the hands of fate."

"Just as you have it, my dear. I have no doubt he will, for the future, want nothing more than to cut our throats, and we'll have to get up very early in the morning to have him foul again. If that is your game we had better be moving. I see he begins to wiggle. If we skip it were best done quickly. When he draws one long breath he will commence to shoot."

For answer Miss Gordon wheeled about with her face toward the town, and with Derringer Deck by her side ran away from danger with a graceful fleetness that took him quite by surprise.

When they had passed through the environs of Brad Awl she halted, directly facing him.

"And now, since that danger has been left behind, with all due thankfulness for the service you have done me, I must have a word with you. Where is my father? Why have you deserted him?"

"Your father! Bless my soul, I had forgotten him. It does look strange. You see I took him into Mike's to show him some fun and my man ran away. Like the idiot I am when I get started, I had to run after him. Of course I didn't catch up, and you ought to be mighty thankful I didn't. Just as I threw up on the chase was about the time Colonel Coldsteel was snaking you out of the sheltering walls of the Ark; and if I had been five minutes later I would have missed you altogether."

"Then of course you do not know what has happened to him since you left; and the story

that man told may have had some foundation in truth."

"Which story were those? I wasn't around, so I can't tell whether he was lying, though on general principles I should say that he was."

"He said that my father had been involved in a fracas, received a bullet in his shoulder, and sought refuge in the house of a man named Ante Pete."

"That's very level talk. Ante is one of the few friends I have here, and if he saw us together once he would be very apt to draw the doctor under the shadow of his wing about the time that the storm began to blow. Let's go to Ante Pete's. It's right on our way; and we can squat in at Mulloney's as we pass."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks. Of course, after what has happened to-night, I know that I can trust you?"

"If that is meant for a square statement I'm very much obliged. If it's a question all I've got to say is, Brad Awl is a place for cash payments on a specie basis, and the less you have to do with trusting—Derringer Deck or any other man—the further ahead of the game you'll be when the bank closes. That's honest; now move on for a little while I peep in and see how things are going on at Mad Mike's."

She walked slowly on, and after a brief time was rejoined by Bright, who came laughing.

"He's not there; but they're asking for him loud. Your friend, Judge Bender, of Black Dam, seems to be the central figure, and if I understand what I heard from the window, he is about to suffer for your father's sins. I don't altogether understand it, but I guess it makes no difference. Here's Ante Pete, off to the left, a dozen yards."

They turned aside and with thorough confidence Derringer Deck strode toward the shanty.

Then the door opened suddenly, and a man standing in the doorway fired a shot full at Deck Bright's breast.

CHAPTER VII.

A VOICE IN THE AIR.

At sight of his friend, Colonel Thompson, Doctor Gordon uttered a glad cry. Here was the man who could help in his trouble.

"A thousand pardons, my dear doctor," said Thompson, springing forward. "I did not expect you for a day or so, and was trying to get everything in shape for me to give you a few days' time. It was only by chance I heard, when I got in, of your arrival, and of course at once hurried to meet you. But what is the matter?"

"My daughter!" gasped the doctor. "While I was absent, hunting you, she has disappeared, and I fear the worst."

"Fudge! No one in Brad Awl would think of harming her. Look at Laughing Lil, Mulloney's dealer. She can go where she wills, alone and unprotected. Brad Awl is as lamb-like as a missionary station in the New Jerusalem. Probably she grew tired waiting and wandered out to look for you. The town is not large enough for her to lose herself in, and I guarantee that she comes to no harm. Come. We will look for her, and as we go along you can explain how it comes you got here two days ahead of time."

The colonel's words were reassuring; and he was the style of man whose assurances would carry weight.

Unless he bore his years marvelously well he was scarcely beyond early middle age, and his face wore the appearance of unruffled prosperity. His dress was suited to the region, yet was made for wear; and in his belt were the arms which even a first citizen would not disdain to wear.

The doctor became cooler, even if still doubtful.

"Do you think so—are you sure of it? It may be that life and death hinge upon giving the alarm. I wouldn't trust any one else; but I will trust you, if you say so honestly. Only don't deceive me, but say the worst at once."

"The worst? Pooh! there's no *worst* about it. I'm afraid some of the boys, who love a little quiet fun, have been stuffing you up with stories about the wickedness of the camp—not directly, you know, but shooting them off where you could overhear."

"But I've been around a little," interposed the doctor, "and what I saw was worse than what I heard. Really, the disregard for life at Mulloney's was horrible!"

"At Mad Mike's? Well, in the vernacular, I should smile! What in the name of wonder ever took you in there—the only positively dangerous place in the town?"

"Then, if Ianthe has gone to hunt me she may be in danger after all, for that is the place she will probably try to find. And you, yourself, spoke of some one—some woman who was in his employ. Oh, everything is all mixed up, and I wish I was safely out. What shall I do?"

Again Doctor Gabriel appeared thoroughly bewildered. He threw up his hands, turned completely around once or twice, and then made a movement to rush from the place. The con-

fusion had been briefer than it seems when described on paper.

None of his excitement was reflected on the plump, good-natured face of the colonel, yet he joined in the movement.

"Moderate your transports, my dear doctor, always moderate them, whether they are of hope or fear. I am with you; and the best and largest part of Brad Awl are with me. Your daughter will come to no harm. To satisfy you we will look around at once."

He caught the doctor by the arm, and the two in company hastily left the house.

"'Melican man wantchee finde glil, bettle looksee Ante Petes. We Waillo healee glil talkee. Wantchee finde Pete; We Waillo no can tell; allo samee him finde maskee. Bettle looksee the'ah."

"You infernal Chinaman, what are you doing here again?"

At the sound of the voice, Colonel Thompson turned angrily and lifted his hand.

Before it could fall the Celestial had skipped out of the way, while Doctor Gordon caught it in his own.

"Wait, wait!" he said. "Why, don't you understand? He says he heard Ianthe inquiring for some one; and though he does not know where he is, he is certain that she has found him. Who is this Ante Pete? and how could my daughter, a perfect stranger, have heard of him?"

"That's your conundrum, my dear friend; and you'll have a dozen worse ones in stock, if you listen to such a double-barreled liar. Why, he's been run out of town a couple of times already; and I can assure you they will hang him before they get through with him if he don't look a little out. No doubt there is not a word of truth in what he says."

"But is there such a man as Ante Pete?"

"Of course there is such a man, though he is no friend of mine. He is a new-comer, and has bought a little shanty not far from this. He is more likely to be anywhere else than home, and I am certain that your daughter could have no possible interest in finding him."

"I do not know; I do not know. It is a clew at least. First, let us go there—to his house. Then—the town is not a large one, and if we do not meet her, you can certainly guess where she might be. If she is still missing a general alarm must be given. If it takes ten thousand dollars I will have her back again."

"Certainly—though for twice ten thousand I would not have her harmed. Here is Ante Pete's. The Chinaman's saying that he did not know where it was, was enough to convince me at once that he was lying. As I remarked, Ante Pete is not one of my friends. You had better manage the interview yourself—if we find him here."

The chances looked favorable, however, as a feeble gleam of light could be seen through a narrow crack in the rough door, and with something like hope at least, the doctor applied his knuckles with a sharpness that brought an immediate answer.

"Come in, if you're white, blast you! If I could, I'd open the door; but, as it is, the sooner you kick it down, the sooner you'll see what sort of a job they've put up on Ante Pete."

The colonel gave an exclamation of surprise. There was evidently some sort of a little mystery here; and its explanation might throw light upon the disappearance of Miss Gordon. He tried the door, and finding that it did not yield he threw his shoulder against it with a force that sent it flying.

As he followed it into the room he saw the figure of a man lying on a rude bunk that occupied one side of the little room.

"Hello! what does this mean?" exclaimed Thompson, in surprise. "Are you sick, dead, or in prison? There's something wrong some way."

"I should remark. It's all thr'u'; or so near it I just missed the fun. I've got a bullet-hole somewhere among my ribs, and if these strings draw much tighter my hands and feet will drop off. Cut me loose and I'll give you a straight tip about the most infernal outrage ever set up even in Brad Awl."

"We'll give you a chance to talk—and maybe two," said the colonel, as he cut the cords. "But say it all slow, and see that you don't get more than a mile off of the truth."

"Thanks. I'm moulting now, and under cow; you can say about what you choose, especially as the infernal thieves took my irons along with them, and you're heeled for all that's out. When I get around again maybe you'll sing a little smaller."

"For Heaven's sake don't attempt any such work as that," interrupted the doctor, pushing his friend aside, and addressing Ante Pete, who had risen to a sitting posture, and was rubbing his limbs to restore the circulation, which had been pretty thoroughly disarranged by the tightness with which he had been bound. "Tell me the truth; did you see anything of a young lady—a stranger here—my daughter? Speak, man. Every moment we waste increases her danger."

"I don't know your daughter from a Yavapai squaw—which I s'pose she ain't; but a blooming

damsel there was round here, and those are why these are thusly. Fire in her heart, blood in her eye, a revolver in her hand, she came in to paint things red—and I reckon she succeeded. She was on the trail after one Derringer Deck, who happens to be an old side pard of mine, and as I wouldn't give him away, she prepared to let me have it. Now, old man, if your daughter is gone on Deck, them be her."

"Oh, curses on Derringer Deck, he seems to be at the bottom of all my troubles. But that explains nothing. Who tied you up?—surely she did not—and where did she go?"

"Sure enough. You can't wait a week for the next installment. In the next chapter there was some shooting done. I wouldn't have supposed a dove with so soft a voice would have done anything but coo gently."

"Will you never finish?"

"Easy by jerks, old gentleman; have I said she went anywhere? It's *my* story I'm a-tellin' you, and if you don't like it you can carry your clams to another market. I don't say she shot; but she had an iron in her hand, there was a flash and I tumbled. Then a whole menagerie seemed to be let loose on me and the next thing I knew I was trussed up as you saw and half a dozen tough little citizens were standing around, with their paws on the girl and their sixes levelled at me. 'We've no quarrel with you, Ante Pete,' gently remarked the boss, 'and we'd sooner than not let you go, if you can keep your tongue still. I'll give you a chance, anyhow. This affair is nothing to you and it's not your chip. If you ever breathe a word about us I'll come back and cut your throat from ear to ear.' So you see I ain't breathing a word."

"The villain is spinning his yarn out for some purpose," broke in Colonel Thompson. "There is nothing to be learned here. Kill him and come on to the next place. We will miss your daughter yet."

"For a level head, you take the cake," laughingly retorted Ante Pete, growing more and more at his ease. "So you don't want to know where she went to after all?"

"Yes, yes. What happened after that?"

Doctor Gordon bent over eagerly and grasped the hand of the young man, that happened to be flourishing within reach.

"Then. Well, she broke away from them all of a sudden, turned a flip-flop as neatly as though she'd never done anything else for a living, and the whole gang, after staring like stuck pigs as her heels twinkled over the sill, followed her out of the window. I s'pect they're all running yet."

"Could it have been Ianthe? I cannot recognize her in such a character; unless she was inquiring for this Deck Bright under the supposition that he had been false to me. She is a strange girl, better able than I to stand alone in such a place as I find this to be. She is capable of doing something desperate. What was her appearance? how was she dressed?"

"Sandals, knee-breeches, a coat with a cape, a pig-tail and an umberella hat," rattled off Ante Pete, glibly. "If it hadn't been for her voice you couldn't have told her from a John Chinaman. I was almost fooled myself."

"A Chinaman! Curses on you, you are in league with that Bright to detain us here. If there is a word of truth in what you say the Celestial must be in it too. There is only one of them up-town and he it was that directed us here. We'll have the truth out of you—"

"But I've been giving it to you straight as I knew how, I swear I have. And—hark! There's Derringer Deck now. If you don't believe me ask him. If he don't give you a solid statement about the time you start to put on frills it will be because he left his shooting-irons at home."

As he spoke he threw up his hands for silence, and in the hush they heard the free tread of the man with the derringers, as he approached outside.

"Ah, I'll be ready for him!" shouted the colonel, as he tore out a revolver; and, throwing open the door, he took hasty aim, and fired.

CHAPTER VIII.

JUDGE BENDER SETS THEM UP.

UNFORTUNATELY for Billy Bender, if he had designs on the stakes of which he had so uncenomiously made himself the holder, the fight between Early Joe and his antagonist was of brief duration, and was decided by a chance blow.

In the uncertain light the two men sparred for a few moments, and then in turn each warily let go. Failing to connect they dodged each other round and round, as though neither was willing to give away a point.

Then, when this had lasted so long that it seemed likely that the fight would degenerate into a farce they suddenly dashed at one another striking blow after blow, straight from the shoulder, yet each at the same time guarding.

The third time Early Joe did not let his fist come out, but drew it back again for another trial. The only half-intended feint brought both time and distance right, and the hit went crashing home.

Jim Norris fell like a log, and as he touched the ground Early Joe dropped on top of him,

his knees on his breast, his hand at his throat. He had the chance now to work his wicked will, with no one to say him no.

If Brad Awl expected to see him plunging in, tooth and nail, Brad Awl was very much disappointed. Though the bitterness of death was between the two men, Early Joe, carefully guarding against any stratagem that might turn the tables on him, bent downward, looking and listening to learn if Norris was entirely unconscious.

He was not, yet he was too limp and nerveless to attempt anything like a successful struggle.

"Poor cuss," said Joe, with a snort, "he's tired; and Joseph rocked him to sleep afore he knew it."

Then, shifting one wrist under his knee he caught off his hat, and began softly to fan the prostrate man.

After all it was only a momentary faintness. The strong life came bursting back through the veins of Jim Norris, and before the laugh of the crowd had died away into a sullen murmur he was writhing in fierce but impotent strength.

At that the iron fingers tightened on his throat again, as Early Joe stooped still lower and ground out in a whisper that was audible only to him:

"I've got you foul, Jim Norris, and right where I want you. I could choke the life out of you if I shut my fingers; but I ain't a-goin' ter do it. I'm goin' ter let yer live; you've got ter live. I'm ther best man, an' you know it. What I want you to see are 'me a-flamin' round with ther Lily ov Brad Awl, an' you not darin' ter open yer mouth. Oh, I'd sooner a dozen times over hev yer live fur that than ter kill yer now, though I hate yer wuss then snakes. Me an' ther Lily—yer hear me, say?"

Norris heard but gave no answer. Mechanically the fingers closed again on his throat, and this time with a force that threatened to shut his breath off altogether.

A warning gasp recalled Early Joe to a sense of the danger. His fingers unloosed and he rose to his feet.

"It's a square heat, boys. I'll corral ther stakes, an set 'em up fur ther city. Come along inside."

Without waiting to see what Norris might say he turned and led the way.

"Now then, hyar—hello. Whar's my man?"

Doctor Gabriel had disappeared, and Billy Bender who had just dropped the stakes in his capacious pockets, looked as though he wished that he had gone along. Perhaps the bartender's grasp on his collar showed why he had lingered.

"Your man had business 'round ther corner, soon ez he saw Jim war licked," explained Rapid Johnny. "Hyer's Mr. Bender thet's holdin' ther stakes in his place. I reckon ef yer crowd him hard enough he'll settle up. I've been a-watchin' ov him, Joe, and he won't be fur throwin' off on yer."

Rapid Johnny evidently had eyes in the back of his head, since, during the confidence between Laughing Lil and the doctor, he had been leaning out of the window, watching the fight with the most intense eagerness.

"So yer thought you'd corral ther sleepers, did yer? Not fur Joe. Fork over, Mr. Bender, and then you kin save yer wuthless neck explainin' how you come ter freeze on."

"Pon me soul I didn't wanter have anything ter do with 'em; Elijer fishbites, no. But he war jist so skeered I thort he'd drop; an' he sez ter me, 'Bender,' sez he, 'I don't know neither ov 'em, but if looks goes fur arything they're real bad men, they be, an' ef ther feller that picked me out gits licked my life wouldn't be wuth a durn. Jest look after them things, will yer, an' tell 'em I'm sorry, but I hed business down town? That's what he said, an' afore I knewed it I hed both hands full of shekels, an' him skipped. In course I didn't wanter chip, an' I were just a-goin' ter run arter him ter bring him back when Johnny mounted me. So hyar I be, an' hyar's yer coin, every dorg-blasted copper ov it. Oh, Jedge Bender are square, every time. You kin b'lieve me, can't ye?"

Billy's voice died away into a whine, and he looked at Early Joe as though he had some fears for his fate, for that worthy had been staring at him in a hard, unwinking way that was enough to break up the nerves of an ordinary man, let alone the softened strings that belonged to the bummer from Black Dam.

Without a word Joe twice counted over the spoils.

Then he looked up, with a red gleam in his eye.

"Ten dollars short. Fork!"

"Ten dollars? Oh, yer can't hev counted straight! I hain't hed that much spelter sence I left Slaughter Bar, three year ago. Count it ag'in, an' count it slow!"

"Last time ov askin'. You can't git away with it. Hand over, er I'll take it off yer corpse. Then I'll go on ter settle with him."

"Don't! Honor bright! Hyar's me pockets, inside out, an' not a thing in 'em. See!"

Suiting the action to the word, Bender turned the pockets—and there was a chug and a jingle as a ten-dollar gold-piece fell to the floor.

"Whar did that come from?" he cried, in an amazement that was too intense not to be gen-

uine. "I sw'ar yer mou't knock me down with a feather! An' it war in me pocket all ther time!"

"And it would have stayed thar, ef I hadn't took good care ter look after it. Ye'r' too durn w'u'thless ter live, an' ther best think we kin do is ter hang yer off-hand. H'iste yer benzine, boys, an' we'll 'tend ter his case arterwards. Johnny, set up ther jug!"

A cheer arose, but whether at the prospect of emptying the jug or enjoying the strangling of Mr. Bender, was not explained, and the judge did not seem inclined to have the point settled.

"It's a mercy ther whisk' comes ahead ov ther circus," remarked a rough, with a grin. "I move Bender gits ther fu'st show. Set 'em up his way."

"Thankee, Bugs, thankee. Ther ole man hez some friends, an' they wouldn't see him turned off dry. Shove her this way, Johnny—shove her this way."

With trembling eagerness old Bender reached for the bottle, and before Early Joe saw what was going on, had downed a brimming tumbler of the ardent.

Then he fell back with a sigh.

"Fix it ter suit yerselves. Anyhow, I die happy," he murmured softly.

And after that it was pretty certain that Billy Bender was in no immediate danger of extinction, though Early Joe was in but little better humor.

When the astronomical observations through the bottoms of the tumblers had been taken by the house, Early Joe backed himself against the bar, with his thumbs in the arm-holes of his rather greasy vest, and looked around him with an ugly scowl.

"I ain't so sure that some one didn't put up this hyer hull job on me fur a chance ter git me outen ther way. Ef I thort so I'd paint this yere town red. Whar's yer condemned stranger that hadn't even sand ernuf ter hold ther stakes? I'm goin' ter talk Spanish ter him. Ef Brad Awl can't have nervier pilgrims than him, cussed ef I wouldn't sooner hev a gang ov Chinamen. Thar's some fun in kickin' them, anyhow."

"Don't be too sure about pickin' him up fur a flat, Josey dear, ther lead may peter out afore yer think yer struck bed-rock. Anyway, he's a side pard ov yourn, fur he holds a hull half-interest in ther Early Joe claim."

The voice floated in after some mysterious fashion, and seemed to be unknown to all there. It might come from the door; it might come from the window; it might come from some one in the room. There was a general raising of heads.

"An' you've got ten dollars ov poor old Billy Bender's in yer pockets. If he'd been half a man you wouldn't a'dared ter try ter shake it outen him."

Early Joe was as much in the dark as to who was the speaker as any of them; but he took up the gauntlet with promptness.

"It's a lie; a long-legged, slab-sided, double-jinted lie; an' hyer's ther man ter back every word he says. Come out afore 'em all, an' say that ag'in ef yer dare. Thar ain't a man owns a foot ov the Early Joe claim but him; an' Billy Bender ain't had ten dollars ov his own sence he struck Brad Awl. Ef yer ax him he'll tell yer so."

"Tell—nothin'. He's too drunk ter snore. Count yer chips with hands on ther board an' see how much ye'r' ahead ov his game. Tell us how much yer hed, when that lunk-head ov a Jim Norris stacked up his checks, an' we'll know how much yer orter pass back to ther jedge."

The strange voice made its statement in a parrot-like tone, almost as if it was repeating a lesson.

"If that's you, Jim Norris, tryin' ter get even with chin," howled Joe, his hands on his revolvers, "you'll never hev a chance ter try ther game arter ter-night; there'll be a fun'ral sure ef I kin git yer in front ov my sixes ag'in."

"Ha, ha. Jim Norris went home, an' went to bed. I'm not talkin' fur him. It's my horn I'm a-blowin'. You ain't hurtin' anybody ter-night, an' ter-morrer yer pard in the mine'll cool yer off. He war jist down hyer sizin' yer up, so ter speak. I seen his bill ov sale."

Early Joe rushed to the window, but without there was no one visible, while right at his shoulder the voice could once more be heard:

"Oh, come back an' count Old Billy's money. Ther rest ov 'em want ter know how it is their-selves."

Fairly badgered by the voice, which, however, he was at last beginning to understand, Early Joe turned.

Brad Awl was perfectly silent.

There was no one there, probably, that cared a cent whether he had Judge Bender's ten dollars or not; and if there was he certainly did not want the batteries of Early Joe turned upon him, in wrath. At the same time there was a thrilling curiosity felt that it might not be altogether safe to disappoint.

Down upon the bar went a double handful of money, and without a word he began to count it.

A muzzled look stole over his face as the count progressed, and it was not until he had gone

over the amount a second time that he exclaimed:

"What thunderin' gouge game are this? I'll be hanged ef I haven't got ten dollars too much."

"That's right. Now, ye'r' white, gi'n it ter William, an' we'll call things even."

Mr. Bender was not near as drunk as he appeared to be a short time before. The voice in the air was as much a puzzle to him as to the rest; and the ten dollar hocus-pocus more so. In the silence that followed he had a chance for the floor and came staggering forward.

"Don't yer b'lieve him, Joe. Ole Billy can't tell er lie. It ain't mine, an' it never war."

"It's yourn, now, jedge. Hanged ef I'll tech ther coin. I'd be purty low down ter steal from you."

"All right then. Set 'em up, Johnny. It's Billy Bender's treat, an' it does me proud. I ain't felt ser good sence I left Black Dam. Ther tide's turned, an' some of these yere days I'll be treatin' with ther best ov yer. Tumble up, hyar, an' help ther ole man keep his end up."

"Ef they all fill up like that," said Rapid Johnny, with an displeased eye on Billy's brimming tumbler, "it'll take a barr'l ter go 'round. Go a leetle slow er yer won't have coin enough to reach."

The voice in the air spoke no longer, the crowd were pushing for places, and Early Joe was standing moodily apart, when the door swung open and Mike Mulloney entered, with Colonel Thompson and Doctor Gordon following close at his heels.

CHAPTER IX.

NOBODY DROPS.

THE little affair at Ante Pete's cabin had all the elements of a tragedy but the corpse; and it would have that too in spite of Derringer Deck's skill and ordinary caution had it not been for the promptness of Ianthe.

Probably it was only a presentiment, but she acted on it with all the certainty of positive knowledge. As the door flew open she caught Bright by the arm, and with a strength and quickness that was wholly unexpected jerked him to one-side.

It was just in time, for, as he moved, Colonel Thompson's revolver blazed, and the bullet went whistling over Bright's shoulder.

Then the colonel discovered that he had made a mistake in leaving his rear unguarded—or in the charge of his friend. The instant that he wheeled Ante Pete sprung up from the bunk and caught down a coat that was hanging on the wall, from the pocket of which he jerked a derringer. As the colonel heard his pistol talk he felt the muzzle of Ante Pete's dash into his ear, the hammer clicking back as it came.

"If you've hurt him you'll go over the range, you infernal, cowardly whelp! I ought to spatter your brains around, and I would if I didn't hate to make a muss. Stand still now till we see what harm's done. Derringer Deck is hard to kill; but an idiot like you—"

Ante Pete was too cool not to mean what he said; though his abiding faith in Derringer Deck's luck made him believe that as yet no great harm had been done. He ceased speaking at the sound of a voice outside.

"Hold your hand, Ante; a miss is as good as a mile, and we don't want any rough work. I've got a bit of calico in tow. Keep him covered till I take his tools and then he can have a chance to rise and explain. Have you seen anything of the stranger I had down at Mike's? Here's his daughter looking for him and he's turned up missing."

"He's here, inside, but look out for yourself. I've a hole in my liver, and I'm going up the flume."

Ante Pete's voice grew slower as he spoke, and strangely thinner. His derringer came out of Colonel Thompson's ear, he gave a gasp, and toppled over, falling to the floor with a crash.

There was a sudden rush through the doorway, and the colonel dodged to one side as Ianthe bounded in.

"Hold!" she said. "This man has been my best friend. Without him I would have been lost. What is the meaning of this base attack; and what wicked work have you been doing here?"

Doctor Gordon looked as if he was too surprised to make any answer, as the girl, without a second look at her father, kneeled at the side of the prostrate man, and raising his head in her lap, placed her hand upon his heart.

With an exclamation of horror she drew it away again and held it up toward the light. It was red with blood.

"Go out, go out! This is no place for you. That is not our work. He would have died if we had not found him. Ah!"

Doctor Gordon suddenly ceased speaking. The colonel with revolver in hand, had crouched near to the floor to peer out, and while he was watching for the enemy in front, Derringer Deck sprang through the window from the rear, crushing him down, while, at the same time, he covered Gordon.

"Hands up, old man," he cried. "I'm not trusting you for a cent, and I'll kill him if he's

harmed my pard. What's this racket? Speak quick, or I'll drill you."

The safety of the doctor lay in his not offering to produce a weapon. With more coolness than would be expected he briefly explained how they had come there, what they had found, and how it was doubtless an unwarranted suspicion that had caused the colonel to make the attempt on Bright's life. It only took a couple dozen words to state the full facts.

"That's so, is it? Well, there's that giddy daughter of yours that I caught running off with Colonel Coldsteel. If I hadn't chipped in she would have had to go, whether or no. The next time he can take her and be happy. You hold your hands very straight up, and march out. If you don't I'll be obliged to plug you. Your daughter can follow; and this whelp I'll take pleasure in kicking out. If I find either of you within pistol-shot of this ranch to-night I'll sling a little solid lead where it will do the most good. Git!"

"But this wounded man—I am a surgeon and I do not wish to leave him to die. At least allow me to examine his wound."

"Thanks; but I'm a doctor myself. If I can't pull him through I'll send for a consultation. Clean out now; I want a chance to get at him. I'd trust you, maybe; but this hound I won't. It's the last asking."

The tones were very positive, and the doctor, who had his fingers well up over his head, was too wise to linger.

"Come, Ianthe, this is no place for you," he said, as he stalked past his daughter. "We are in positive danger every moment until I get you back to the Ark."

"Better go, miss," added Bright. "You can't do him any good, and I want you out of the way when I fire this vermin out."

The "vermin" lay with his face to the floor, his arms twisted behind him, Derringer Deck holding his crossed wrists in a gripe that never loosened, his voice as steady as though there was not one seemingly dead man there, and prospects fair for more.

Ianthe hardly took in the situation. All of her attention was centered on Ante Pete. When she had looked at her stained hand with a shiver she turned her glance again to the wounded man, and now, as she bent over him, she uttered a glad cry:

"Ah, his eyes open! He lives! I knew he could not be dead. I will go now. And do not harm my father, or that man. It has all been a mistake. You have been such a good friend to me, we will all thank you when the time is more fitting."

She laid the head of the reviving Ante Pete softly down and quietly flitted out.

"And now you go, too."

With a display of strength that was wonderful in a man of his size, Derringer Deck shifted his grasp, and with one prodigious heave flung Colonel Thompson far out into the moonlight. Then he slammed the door and turned to his friend.

"Look out for yourself, Deck," came feebly from the lips of the wounded man.

"Don't you worry. The girl will look after that. Thompson don't want to quarrel with the old man yet, and he's gone too far as it is. Now, old boy, is it up and down serious? Let's see how bad you're hurt."

"Not as bad as it might be. There's a rib cracked and some blood lost, but I'll be all right. Tie me up and give me a little whisky. I've a heap of funny things to tell you. Maybe you can see your way clear through them; hang me if I can."

So Derringer Deck very coolly proceeded to minister to his wants and examine into his hurt, while he listened to the history of what had happened.

Meantime the shrewdness of Bright's trust had become apparent. The trio had gone off in the direction of the Ark.

Colonel Thompson had sprung up raving, but Ianthe had thrown herself upon his arm and shaken reason into him.

"Very well, miss. It is all about you, anyhow, and the affair can keep until to-morrow. Brad Awl has no use for those two men. In spite of what you say I am convinced that they had something to do with your abduction, though the scheme happened to go wrong. You should never have come here at all, and I wish you were safely out of it. I see that you are going to seriously clog your father's efforts for wealth."

"I am not so sure of that," answered the young lady sharply. "I can take very good care of myself, and ask no protection from him or you. Go your way and I will go mine."

"Perhaps you are right," said the colonel, thoughtfully, "but your courage will be thoroughly tested before you get through. It would be so in every other mining-camp, and it will be so at Brad Awl. If we escort you back to the Ark will you have the courage to remain there again alone? There are parties here that I am most anxious he should see to-night. It is most unfortunate that I should have been away when you arrived."

"Afraid! what should I be afraid of? I have been deceived once—that will not happen again."

I learn fast. I know now that in this savage region you must trust no one."

"I hope I am not included in that sweeping assertion; though I would rather be a victim of unmerited doubt than have you confide in the rest of the world to your own danger."

They were at the Ark now, and without answer Ianthe hurried in, leaving her father to follow whatever might be the desires of his heart, uninfluenced by her.

"You have, unfortunately been to Mulloney's to-night, and created a bad impression. It seems to me imperatively necessary that you should visit the place again and do what is possible toward repairing the damages. In my company it will be perfectly safe. How is it? Will you be guided by me?"

"Have it your own way," answered the doctor, wearily.

"This excitement is too much for me, and will break me down I suppose; but I am willing to at least try to do whatever you think is necessary."

"Then come on. Show no fear or fluster, and trust in me. Brad Awl is as safe for a tenderfoot as any spot in the universe, if he don't put on frills and furbelows."

They walked briskly away, talking as they went. When they reached the saloon they noticed Mad Mike just in the act of entering and they followed promptly after.

A savage smile wrinkled the lips of Early Joe as he saw the new-comer, and instinctively his hand dropped toward the weapons he had again belted on; but before he could move a step he felt a light touch, and a voice whispered in his ear:

"Don't you do it, Joe. Somehow, I know they are all against *you*. They have been trying to get you into trouble all evening, and if I were you, I would hold back until they showed their hand, if nothing else. That man is only a dummy, and it's Thompson that is setting him up. What he wants is always blood and gold. Better save both, and turn the tables on him in the end. Hush, now! don't let on that I spoke to you. If you have the nerve to do it, clear out, and I'll see if I can't find out the truth and let you know to-morrow."

She spoke hastily, while Thompson was introducing his friend to the proprietor, and the others were moving forward, so that no eyes were on them.

"Ye'r' askin' me to show the white feather," he retorted; "an ef it was a man ez did that I'd knock him down."

"You are wrong. It is the winning feather that I want you to show. You've ruffled it around here pretty well, but this is not your night on. Will you go to please me?"

It seemed to be a hard task, and yet he only hesitated for a moment.

"It's the first thing you ever asked of me, an' I'll do it. Let them ez crows over it ter-night look out fur to-morrer. Early Joe'll be 'round!"

"Thank you, Joe. By the back way now—by the back way, while they are not looking."

"Let 'em look. Good-night, Lil, and look out fur yerself. When the bank wins, there's apt to be more than growlin' in Brad Awl; an' I've allus bin hyer ter see fair play."

With this parting warning, he glided out of the back door, as Doctor Gordon had done a short time before.

The movement was quietly made, yet just as he went through the doorway the eyes of Colonel Thompson rested on him for an instant, and a frown of disappointment overspread his face.

The frown was momentary, but Laughing Lil caught its expression, and could have laughed.

"Not this time, Colonel Thompson," she thought. "With Early Joe out of the way, you'll have a hard time to get up a racket here, when Mike Mulloney is at the fore. I think the bank will open soon, and maybe I will have a chance at the innocent stranger."

Nonchalantly she threw herself in the easy-chair behind the table, and waited for the bettors at the interrupted deal to return.

CHAPTER X.

"IN VINO VERITAS"—PERHAPS.

It was not more than an hour later that Doctor Gordon came staggering up to the ark between the colonel and a friend to whom the colonel had introduced him.

"I'm sorry you didn't have a chance to see Early Joe to-night, but we'll find him in the morning. I judge you are not accustomed to dissipation, from the effect of the very mild form of it we have been indulging in to-night. You will have to brace up a little if you want to make headway at Brad Awl."

"Thash o' right," responded the doctor, thickly. "Gep my war painton—show 'em Spanish, hic. Notsh ther benzine 'tall—ridin' in ther windsh. Goo'-nightsh."

"Better let us see you to your room."

"Noter shtepsh furder. I'm ol rightsh. Go'-nightsh. Won' have it. Kin walksh myself. Goo way er I'll howl."

"There, there, that will do," laughed the colonel. "If you are able to navigate I assure you that we don't want to come in. If Miss

Gordon has not barricaded the door I feel pretty sure that you will be all right. Good-night."

"Goo'-nightsh," mumbled the doctor, with drunken gravity, and turning he lurched through the doorway, and guided by the wall began to make his way toward his room.

The colonel listened long enough to know that there had been no catastrophe.

"He will do, Chet, if the girl don't set up a howl when he reaches his room. But he must be managed more carefully. Never saw a man that could drink less whisky and have it fly to his head quicker. About the time we were ready to lead him up to try his hand on the table he was ready to go to sleep under it. Fortunately he didn't have much money with him so nobody is much the worse off."

"Just as you have it. I don't profess to understand your game. If you had got him into Early Joe's paws I don't think there would have been much left for little Lil to handle."

"Very true; but as Joe wasn't about I thought it might make things more pleasant for Mike and the girl if they got a divy. It requires their aid after all, to carry the game through. We will see what to-morrow brings forth."

While they were walking down street, engaged in this sort of conversation, the doctor was making a quiet entrance to his room.

"Is that you?" inquired Ianthe, as she heard him stumble on the threshold of the adjoining room.

He carefully shut the door before making answer:

"Yes, it is I—thanks to a little more common sense than they gave me credit for. If I hadn't played off drunk they would have made me so in reality. As they have my gauge quite thoroughly, the next time they won't undertake to pour quite so much fire-water in, and then the fun will last longer. Quite a varied experience we have had of it, and all that was required to complete the interest was for me to have met the festive Early Joe. I had a glimpse of his face again, and understand that he had been making personal threats, but for some reason he declined the meeting, and went off to his burrow to nurse his wrath. It strikes me that Brad Awl society is a little mixed; and the mad Irishman, who keeps a rum-shop and faro-saloon, is the only honest man in it."

"I believe you," responded Ianthe heartily. "At least the rest are bad enough in their way, and I have no doubt but that he is as bad as the worst. The danger I had been in seemed to give no one the least trouble, and the murder of the man that saved me would have only been a bit of pleasant amusement, if your friend the colonel could have accomplished it. Fortunately he met a man that could take care of himself. He and his friend, who I feel confident was not seriously harmed, can look after themselves, and would be bad men to have as enemies. I would advise you to steer clear of their anger."

"And them not to interfere between me and my affairs. When they strike Thompson they strike at us, in more ways than one."

"Unless they have some *peculiar* grudge of their own they will not trouble him unless he troubles them."

"Or unless they have designs on me, you had better say. There have been too many friends turning up to-night. I distrust them all, and what is back of them. There is a league somewhere, if not everywhere."

"If you are afraid of it, why not get out?" returned the girl, briskly. "You are not obliged to stay. You knew it, in fact, before you came. If we had found them different we would have been disappointed."

"Of course; and I am not murmuring. 'The way to the stars is rough,' as the old proverb says. That is no difference if we get there. Good-night."

"Which we certainly will. Good-night."

The doctor went back to his own room, and in a very little time the two were fast asleep. Whatever might be the complications around them they were very far from giving way to fear.

The night passed without further interruption, and the sun was well up before they were awake and moving. By that time Brad Awl had got on its daylight dress, and was going about its every-day affairs. As it was not the Sabbath, everything was serene, and semi-respectable.

Ianthe having breakfasted was looking cautiously around when she came face to face with Derringer Deck. He had his spectacles off, and really was quite a presentable man.

He nodded in a free and easy manner, but she held out her hand.

"I want to give you thanks by daylight for the service you did me last night. My father will do the same when he meets you and will apologize for the fracas, in which indeed, he had no part. From what he and his friend had heard it was not hard to mix you up in it; and I suppose they have the fashion here, that is only too prevalent in mining-towns, of shooting first and investigating afterward. How is your friend?"

"Thanks, that is all right. Your father seems to be harmless enough, and I'd do him a friendly turn any time that I knew how; but for Thompson, who wants to run this camp, I've no great

love, and I'm glad I made him show his hand. My friend is all right—no thanks to him, I had a close call though; and I'd like to have a chance to pull on the man that sent the shot. I'll bet high I could go him one better unless it was a chance shot, which I sometimes suspect."

"And there is no doubt but that he will recover?"

"Not a bit—unless he's caught a chronic derangement of the heart. The ball splintered along a rib, right over that important member, letting out what little of the sanguine it could find, and when the reaction came he fainted away. That's nothing. He will be out to-day, and well to-morrow. Until that time keep yourself and that father of yours out of trouble; and look out for Colonel Coldsteel and his Lucky Seven. They turn up when you least expect them."

"Thank you; I am doubly armed. If the colonel comes I will look for you to be there also."

"If possible; but, thanking you for your trust, I've other affairs on hand that may interfere with the gallant rescuer business, and I would advise you to have an eye for your own safety."

He bowed himself away at that and Miss Gordon did not reply though she thought she perceived the sarcasm under his words; she had her own reasons for believing that whatever might happen to her he would be found near at the finish. As she knew that he had not been in his room the previous night and consequently could not have overheard the conversation between her father and herself, she had intended to give him warning, but that escaped her mind just now, and only when it was too late did she think of it. From the doorway of the Ark she watched him go down the street toward Ante Pete's cabin."

"I wonder if I am wrong?" she muttered. "I had half a mind to make the charge boldly, and have done with suspicion. At any rate, I am all the safer—though what could one man do, or three for that matter, if they had to fight the town?"

"'Melican gil bettle look see shlap him; no hap love-pidgin inside he mouth. Delinglee Deck hap heap catchee waifo alloleddy. No hittee use fool lound him. On'y maskee thubble galow. Eh, ch'ho?"

Miss Ianthe looked up calmly and without a blush at the Celestial who breathed his advice into her ear.

"Ah! you are the ubiquitous Chinaman that has been making more bother than your head is worth. I don't know what you suspect, but I can vouch for it you are on the wrong tack anyhow; and I am certain that if you had kept away from Ante Pete's, last night, it would have been the safer for you and the better for him. Let me alone, or there will be trouble in town!"

Miss Gordon spoke like a little rowdy—a thing she did not often do—and the other listened to her, bland and unmoved.

"Allee lightee. We Wailo speak um thuth; no can do bettle. Him find way uppe when he that can do. No care fo' bad man when him an' him 'volver lound. So longee! See him 'g'in-Blad Awl be on wheels, an' We Wailo chief in camp when um time come."

Having said this much, he skipped away without waiting for an answer; and Ianthe did not attempt to stop him for the last word, to which the sex is entitled. It seemed pretty certain that he was domiciled within the building, and, doubtless, he would turn up again. Besides, just then she was interested in a woman who brushed past her—a woman with a handsome, almost a sweet face, a perfect figure, and a costume at which a *connoisseur* in dress could find nothing to cavil. In daylight, no pantaloons and sack coat for her.

Of course it was the young lady best known as Laughing Lil; but this was the first time that the two had met, and Miss Gordon could only suspect. The description her father had given her of the lady of the faro-table had been brief, and fell far short of the reality. From that description she had hardly thought she would care to meet her; but now she wished that she had looked for an opportunity, and then made the most of it.

Lily Bascombe was too busy with her own thoughts to even notice her. She stepped straight on with the air of a queen, and when she had gone a hundred yards, met the very man she was looking for—Joseph Early.

"Good-morning, Joe," she said, with scarcely a perceptible movement of her lips. "I want to have a little talk with you, but I don't want all Brad Awl as witness to the performance. I'm going to be at the bridge in about twenty minutes—taking my constitutional, of course—and if you can drop down there about that time, I'll say my say."

"Good-mornin', Lily. I see yer dodge, an' I ain't too proud not ter take a chance like that, ef I hev ter crawl ther hull way. I'll be thar, an' ther town won't be any ther wiser."

"Just so it don't look like a regular appointment I don't care. Just now I don't want that. It might make trouble."

The words that passed between them were so

few that they could scarcely have attracted any attention, and if they had no one would have suspected their import, especially as the young lady directed her steps straight to Mad Mike's, entering the place by the rear door, and remaining within fully ten minutes, and when she came out again she sauntered slowly toward the bridge that spanned the stream which ran through the little valley, just beyond the town.

As she reached the spot Early Joe rose up from the stringer on which he had been lying, and bowed respectfully.

"Ah, you're here, are you, Joseph? Now, what I've got to say I'll put short and sweet. I'm your friend—as good a friend as you have in the world—but I can't be anything else to you. I'm a married woman."

"Go on. Say that it's to Jim Norris and I'll forgive yer. I'll know, then, ye'll be a widder afore dark."

"Don't be a fool. Norris is nothing to me, and never could be, though I need him as well as you. Of course as a woman I can see the trouble between you two, but I can't reproach myself with having done anything to bring it about. I have certainly done my best to keep you both at a distance, and if I have not always succeeded it was not the fault of my intentions. Last night there was a change in the state of affairs, and to-day I have need of you. Not to beat around the bush, I want a half-interest in your claim, and money has got to buy it. Name your figure, and I'll count it down. What is your price?"

The answer came in a tone of cold determination.

"The name of your husband."

CHAPTER XI.

LAUGHING LIL SETS UP HER LITTLE GAME.

"Poor fool, do you think to intimidate me? What earthly good would that name do you? When he dies it must not be by *your* hand; at least not now or here."

"Then you hate him. Good. I can wait. I'm not blaming you; and if you're a married woman I'm not asking you even to give me a hope. All I do ask is fair play. If you deceive me, so much the worse for both of us. If you are honest, ask what you want and take it along. I want no money of yours."

Laughing Lil looked at him keenly.

"It is just as I thought," she began. Then she completed the sentence to herself.

"I had suspected the rough dialect was only put on; now I know it. What difference, though? If I asked him no doubt he would tell me the secrets of his life, but if he did it would commit me as I do not care to be. Let it be."

Then aloud:

"If it was for myself I might take you at your word; but I want to be honest with you now, to avoid future trouble. I want you to name the price for the half-interest you sold or were going to sell through Thompson, and I will either see that you have the money down for it to-day, or will secure you against the loss of it."

"What sort of game is this on foot, anyhow? Do you want me to eat what I said before them all last night? If Thompson has sold the half interest that I put into his hands and got away with the money, I'll get away with him. That's solid."

"Yes, if you take your time to it; but meantime he may want to get you embroiled with the innocent purchaser. Whether he wants to have him or you killed off is what I want to see. I am risking money on it—to make sure that it shall be neither, and yet have him show his hand."

"Keep your money, then, little woman, and say just how you want it played. You think Early Joe is good for nothing but the war-path; I'll show you differently."

"Good. But you mustn't lose money by it. That man, last night, was the purchaser; and if I had let you go they would have forced blood on one side or the other. To-day you have had a chance to cool, and you can carry out my idea of meeting this Doctor Gordon quietly, as if everything was straight or could be made so. I know that, if no one has lied, your arrangement with Thompson was three thousand down and share and share alike in the expenses. One would think it was too cheap to swindle, after the discoveries that have since been made. Am I not right?"

"You are, as far as you go; but how did you find out? It was to be a secret between Thompson and me."

"A little bird told me. But that is neither here nor there. I'm not asking you not to look out for your interests, or to fail to protect yourself; but I want you to do it in a quiet, rational way, as though everything was all right; and then to let me know how it turns out. Can I rely on you?"

"And this is to be a secret between you and me?"

"It is."

"Then count me there. Here's my hand on it. If that is to be the game the less you and I are seen together until it is played, the better, but you can believe me all the time. I'm not asking any reasons or any confidence till I've proved I'm worth them. If you believe that Joe Early

will turn out the pure white article you'll never find yourself mistaken."

And without asking pledge or promise of reward, Early Joe yielded himself into the hands of this woman, whom he adored, as a passive instrument.

"Thanks. Go on, then, as though you believed Thompson in good faith intended to pay you the three thousand, and I will see that you receive it."

With this parting assurance they separated, Lil making her way back to town.

"Not much of the laugh about her now," thought Early Joe, as he watched her going. "Nothing but sober, honest business. What it all means I can't guess and I won't try. It's not much I'm losing anyhow; and if you want to trust a woman you must go the entire figure or lose the game. If Mr. Thompson and the Co., call around to-day they'll find Early Joe at home and very cool."

If the Co., meaning thereby Doctor Gordon, could have overheard the interview, the result of his first investment at Brad Awl might have seemed less doubtful; and he might have met his friend with a more cheerful face. As it was when the colonel dropped in at the Ark to ask after his health, he found him looking the worse for wear, and decidedly modest about appearing on the street while he was inclined to be snappish over the last night's outing.

"No. After the exhibition I made of myself I don't think your people, or the better portion at least, will want to see anything of me to-day. It was simply disgraceful, sir; simply disgraceful."

"Humbug! You feel a little off color this morning and everything looks blue. We'll have an eye-opener or two and it will be all right. What was the matter with last night?"

"Nothing was the matter with the night, but a good deal the matter with me. I must have been drunk as a lord, from the account my daughter gives me this morning."

The colonel laughed heartily, and his laugh was a pleasant, ringing one, that was very apt to make the man who heard it his friend.

"Is that all? Why, what do you care for the cattle at Mike Mulloney's, anyhow? There wasn't a man there that hasn't started out, in his mind, to paint the town red, or that remembers anything about you this morning. And if you called yourself drunk last night, they'd laugh at you. As soon as you began to feel your oats you climbed off to bed, and that was the end of it."

"I wish I could think so, but such light dissipation can hardly account for the ripping headache I have this morning. What was the trouble between Early Joe and me?"

"Who has been loading you up with any such nonsense as that? Why, you didn't see the man at all. He had been on the loon himself, and had some kind of a racket; I suppose you heard them talking about it. But he went home before you came. I want you to meet him to-day, however, and I think you can agree without much trouble."

"From what I seem to have read about him, I am afraid we can't. I doubt the wisdom of the investment. He must be a terrible fellow."

"Not at all—not at all; if you take hold of him right. If he tries to bluff you don't give an inch; he will soon come to his senses. But about the singular adventure of your daughter. As you requested it, I have said nothing in regard to it; but it needs explaining. I still think that pair had more to do with it than we have been told. It may give us a clew. They are comparative strangers here, and as far as can be discovered, are after no good. If we can obtain proof positive, the good men of Brad Awl will combine and run them out in a hurry. I do not say that you or your daughter are in danger, or that there is much chance of another attempt being made soon, now that the futile effort has put you on your guard; but common caution is advisable."

The colonel eyed his *vis-a-vis* sharply while he spoke. Most likely he had a hidden thought which he did not care to express; yet something showed itself in his face, since the doctor flushed a little and answered:

"I believe that my daughter is right in wishing to keep as much as possible her adventure to herself. She has no desire to pose as a heroine; and she is confident that but for the chance that brought that young man in spectacles on the spot, she would have been in a plight worse than death. She thanks him accordingly, and wants the matter to rest there. I wish she was somewhere else; but as that cannot be, we will make the best of it. When my nerves get a little settled, I will be ready for business; but don't talk of it this morning—I am not fit to meet a man like Early Joe."

"All right, there is no rush, though of course I would be with you, to look after your interests. I feel as though I had been instrumental in bringing you here; and I shall see that you don't suffer."

"I haven't a doubt of it, not a doubt," responded the doctor, hastily, "but I don't want to attempt to do business when I'm not fit for it, or spoil the future by present rashness. I am impressed with the possibilities of Brad Awl,

but am more than ever satisfied that we must proceed with caution, sir, with great caution; and I want to take a review of the situation. Don't let me interfere with your affairs this morning; and perhaps you will be the better able to give me some of your time this afternoon."

The doctor's hesitancy was not so unreasonable after all, and without any further attempt to overcome it Colonel Thompson, left Gordon to his own devices.

The doctor retired to his room; but stayed there less than half an hour. When he reappeared, after a few questions he strolled off by himself. If the colonel had been about, most likely he would have been very much surprised at seeing that his friend turned his steps directly toward Early Joe's cabin.

It was something of a walk but his resolution never faltered. He approached the spot without a shadow of hesitation, yet with a carefully subdued manner—just business all over.

By chance he struck the place just as Joe had finished preparing his dinner. It might have been better timed to have come half an hour later; but under the circumstances it was the best that the doctor could do.

Quietly he spoke; and Joe listened to him in a watchful, reasonable way that he had hardly expected.

"Good-morning, Mr. Early. I have taken the liberty of hunting you out because I wanted to see you alone. I'm not altogether used to your ways here, and may not show off to advantage; but I want you to treat me as man to man, and I promise that we will both be the gainer by it, and you will find me white clean through. What do you say?"

He held out his hand in a frank sort of way, without appearing to notice the momentary hesitation; or showing afterward the surprise that perhaps he felt when Early Joe's closed over his in a solid, steady grip.

"Ef I'm not mistook yer ther man ez were stake-holder fur that durned wu'thless sort ov affair at Mad Mike's las' night. I war howlin' mad jest then; but I've heared this mornin' su-thin' 'bout the trouble thet that war like ter hev happened at ther Ark, an' ef I sed arythin' wrong, bein' ez thar's no one 'round ter see me chaw sand, I take it all back. Ef ye'r white you'll find me ther same pure quill. Ef yer hez any low down game ahind yer slick words, all ther wuss fur *you*. Ther man seldom lives ez goes back on Early Joe. You kin be friend er foe, an' hez ther chance ter make yer ch'ice; but yer can't be both. How are it? Say it quick, an' say it fur keeps."

There was a glitter in his eyes, as he spoke, that showed how much in earnest he was, and eagerly he listened to the doctor's answer. He was going as far as he had promised, and even further, but he did not intend to be played for a fool without fair warning of what must be the consequences.

"Let me tell you just who I am, what I have done, and how I am situated. Then you give me a square answer, without any passion in it, of what you think I ought to do, and I pledge you my word to follow your advice."

"Don't promise *too* much; it looks ez though yer war tryin' ter pile it on thick. An' don't wait too long. I want her settled afore I change my mind."

"Then I will cut it short. My name is Gabriel Gordon, and I am a stranger on the slope. I have some money, and want to make more. In Glory Gulch I came across Colonel Thompson. He advised me to come here, telling me that there were dozens of chances to one at the Gulch. He even had one to place right in my hand; the half-interest in the claim of a man who needed capital to help him work a bonanza in a small way. I paid him as the agent of that man, and came down, thinking that it was all right. I have heard since that there is likely to be trouble about the matter, and what I want to know, quietly and between friends, is, whether you are willing to take me in, my capital against your experience, or whether I am to go to Thompson and tell him I've found him out to be a fraud? That's the whole story. Of course it was the Early Joe claim that I thought I bought into."

Early Joe gave no signs of the anger the other had expected. He was silent for a moment or two, revolving his answer, and then, still in the vernacular of Brad Awl, gave it:

"It's no use my tellin' yer thar's bin a snide game somewhar. Ef ye'r half ther man I think yer are frum yer looks, by this time yer know it. Ab Thompson did hev a power ov 'torney, but he warn't ter use it fur three months, while I hed ther chance ov gittin' it back. It war a trick ov ther pasteboards that done it; but that's neither hyar ner thar. I shu'd hev hed three thousand dollars outen it, anyhow, an' I ain't seen ther color ov it. Ef I know anythin' about ther kurnel, I think ther hull story are thet he means ter fight us both, an' kerrel ther mine hisself."

"Has he such a bad reputation, then? I heard of him as an honest, upright man; and to be relied on thoroughly."

"That's the wu'st of it. Cordin' ter Brad Awl sugar don't melt in his mouth, an' he's bin a

friend o' mine right erlong till I let him get mix-ed in with my find. I ain't goin' round shootin' off my mouth about him but you axed me as a man ter man what I thort an' I give it to yer, straight. Some day Brad Awl'll find he's wuss ner a bad man frum Bitter Crick. When he knows them's my 'pinions it'll be because you told him; I'm jist layin' back quietter see what's ther next dodge."

"And how about our relations, Mr. Early? You see, I'm leaving it all to you."

"Kim in on ther ground floor, ef you've got ther sand ter stay ther. I'll never shake yer. Let it all be ez though the kunnel war squar' ez a die."

"Done—and wouldn't it be just as well if we didn't let on about this little private arrangement, and fix it all up at another meeting? I enjoy a quiet joke, and it appears to me—it simply appears—that we will have a very large one on Colonel Thompson, if he is playing the game I suspect."

"Kerrect you be—ef he don't ketch on to yer visit, an' put two an' two tergether I hev ther reputation of bein' a bad man, quick on ther trigger. That's bizness. Don't interfere with me an' you'll find I kin be somethin' else."

The terrible interview was over and the doctor went away with a smile on his lips, while Early Joe looked after him with a puzzled expression on his face, as he muttered:

"Brains tell every time. He may not be up to all ther dodges of a gang of sharps, but unless the kurnel gits ther drop on him, an' shoots, he'll find that innercent kid kin hold him very level. I suppose I'm a fool; an' yet it looks ez though I wouldn't make a bad thing ov it givin' ther Lily her way."

CHAPTER XII.

SINGULARLY STRANGE.

It will be remembered that the bragging giant who called himself Ananias Jawler made a sudden exit from Mike Mulloney's, and was followed by Derringer Deck until the latter lost the trail. He realized the folly of further search, and, a thoroughly puzzled man, was returning when he was so fortunate as to meet Miss Gordon and her daring abductor, and in the events that followed he almost forgot the vanished Hercules.

The following day, when he had been assured that Ante Pete was little the worse for his adventure, and all that he required was a little rest and quiet, he started out on a tour of the camp, to see if Ananias had made a reappearance, or to obtain a solution of the mystery of his disappearance.

Jawler was not to be heard of; and as it seemed possible to follow his trail, or at least explore in the direction he had gone without attracting attention, Bright drifted out of town.

He had his wits about him, and did not forget that the horseman whom he had tumbled over might have an eye on him, for after the affair at Ante Pete's was over he had cautiously revisited the spot, and found that the man had recovered his senses and taken himself out of the way.

"It's only a chance that I can strike the trail," he thought; "and if I do it's got to be eyes open and thumbs on hammers if I don't want to knock down a hornets' nest. If I was sure he had skipped the town for good I'd say go and never come back; but I don't want him turning up to stir the pool of Brad Awl's suspicions. I'll have a bad enough time as it is, to hold my own till the circus here is over, and if Nita is really here, which seems on the one side possible, and on the other wholly improbable, I will have more trouble than I even had in the old days at Bunco. So much for friendship, and a bull-headed desire to see things through. Well, I can't do more than one thing at a time, and for the present I'll turn my attention to the roaring Ananias."

His thoughts shaping themselves in some such way he held on his course, turning away from the trail a little beyond the point where he had last seen Jawler.

It seemed to him, the night before, almost certain that Jawler had dodged to the side of the trail, and he had then made an excursion far enough to convince him of the folly of going on in the darkness. Now he pushed on over his own tracks. Any one seeing him might have suspected that he was prospecting for ore, since the country beyond furnished a not unlikely field for such labors, and Derringer Deck was no novice at that kind of work.

He was proceeding by chance, since, as yet, he had found no signs of a trail or even an occasional footprint to guide him. Yet it was a chance that was not altogether ungoverned by reason, for more than once when he took what appeared to be the most unlikely route the seeming difficulties vanished as he came to them. Old habits of mountain life stood him in good stead now, and with his unhesitating progress and rapid stride he had soon found his way well in among the hills by the straightest route, yet by one that evidently had been but seldom traveled.

Then, right before him, lay at last the thing for which he had been searching.

When Deck Bright sized up a man he knew him all over. So, when he saw that one footprint on a little patch of soft earth of ground he knew that it had been made by Ananias Jawler.

"Got him at last," he chuckled. "I'll find out now whether he's a lunatic, an ordinary tough, or one of Colonel Coldsteel's Lucky Seven; and perhaps, if he is one of the latter, why the gallant road-agent is fool enough to go out of his way to hunt me. Steady, now. There's a lair somewhere, and it won't be apt to be overly far from Brad Awl. Now that I know there's tracks here if I don't find them I'll give my hat to Pete and take the back track."

The other tracks were there, and without much trouble he found them.

"Kind of curious this," he said, after a little. "Wonder if he ran all the way? Looks as though he rode a breakneck act down here. Great Caesar, what strides! Ah, what's this?"

Flat on the ground fell Derringer Deck, for not twenty yards away he saw looming up the gigantic shoulders of Ananias.

He was standing as stiff and motionless as though carved out of the bowlders which lay around in such profusion.

"What in the name of wrath is the fool up to? Does he hear something that don't reach my ears; or is he dead and propped up? It looks like a sell of some kind, but how could it be got up for the benefit of your uncle Ezra unless there have been sharper eyes looking for me than I dreamed of. What's to be done? It won't do to back out, and if there's an ambush ahead it won't do to go on. They've seen me like enough before this."

Yet on taking a second glance it hardly looked like an ambuscade, from the fact that a spot would have been chosen entirely too favorable to his own movements. It was possible to reach cover on either side without being seen from the suspicious point beyond, and after a little consideration Derringer cautiously rolled over, and found himself at length hidden by a swell in the ground, behind which he noiselessly squirmed his way, toward a point from which he was certain he could obtain a clear view of the face of Ananias. He never allowed himself to unduly hasten his rate of progress, nor did he intermit his caution, though at every glance he took he could see that Jawler maintained the same position.

Perhaps ten or fifteen minutes were passed in this sort of work before Bright, with a revolver in one hand, with the other carefully thrust his hat into partial view, and then drew it back again.

If any one was watching for him the faint did not draw a shot, so he risked more.

An exclamation of surprise trembled on his lips as he caught sight of Jawler's face.

The man was neither dead nor sleeping, yet his features were set and motionless.

With precise care Bright tossed a cartridge at the burly form.

It struck Ananias on the shoulder, but he neither winced nor started.

"What the deuce is it?" thought the watcher. "Looks as though the performance of last night was on the square, though it goes ahead of me. Must be a fit of some kind. Anyhow, it's worth a risk to get to the rights of it, and I'll run it if it takes a wheel off. The coast seems clear."

He glided out from his covert and approached the statuesque figure; touched it, walked around it, tried to lift an arm, which he found rigidly folded across the broad breast that was undulating with a scarcely-perceptible motion.

"The man has a fit, sure enough. I'll try him with a little of the pure, unadulterated red-eye. If that don't bring him I'll have to push him over and roll him back to Brad Awl. No use to think of toting such a mountain of flesh and bones."

He drew out a flask as he spoke, and removing the stopper, worked the neck between the whitened lips and upturned the bottle. No use. The precious liquid dripped out at the corners of the set mouth, and the flask was hastily thrust away.

But when Bright looked up again he saw that there had been a change.

"Hello, old man, you're coming 'round, are you? Beats the Jews, this does. I've seen sleep-walking, but this lays way over it. Wake up and tell us what we can do for you. The perfume of the ardent must have brought you. If it will do you any real good, you can have the whole bottle full. Eh! good glory!"

Nothing to wonder at was the sudden exclamation, since Derringer Deck suddenly found himself in a heap, and feeling very much as though a herd of buffalo had struck him in a stampede. Without further warning, Ananias had suddenly moved straight forward, actually walking right over him. Quickly as he looked up, Jawler was already several rods away, striding off at a great rate.

Determined to see this to the end Bright sprung up and after him, and in a few bounds was running right behind. So closely did he follow that he almost stumbled over him when Ananias abruptly halted and assumed a sitting posture.

"Great snakes!" muttered the giant, rubbing his eyes, "whar be I, an' what be I an' how come yer so? Ef Sammy hev passed in his checks why be I hyer, an' which so. Blast my cats, he's hed me off on another r'ar; I feel it in me bones. No jokin' this time; they're clean bruk in two."

He lifted his legs slowly, and with evident pain, and then began to rub them, to restore the circulation, as he supposed. Now that he had come out of his trance he felt in every nerve and bone its effects.

"So you've come to, have you? That's good enough. Brace up, take a snifter of this, and then tell me all about it. I'm dying to know what set you to cutting up those didoes. I don't suppose you ran away from a little man like me; but if you haven't a clean story to tell the boys in Brad Awl will believe it. Come, drink hearty, it won't hurt."

This time the giant's appetite did not fail him. He rolled his eyes up, first in surprise and then in thankfulness, but before uttering a word shoved the neck of the tilted bottle between his lips.

"Here, here, let up on it!" laughed Bright at length. "You can't get full on it, for you'd hold a barrel and that's only a pint, so you may as well leave a mouthful for your uncle Ezra, who is the real proprietor."

"You're white, whoever you be, an' Ananias Jawler ses so—Why, hello! Ef it ain't—yes, it are—Derringer Deck. Shake, leetle pard, yer done me proud, an' I 'pologize—privately an' 'thout witnesses fur ther durn fool work in Brad Awl. I kin explain it all, straight ez a ramrod ef you'll take it; an' I know yer won't hev hard feelin's when yer git ter ther bed-rock ov ther story."

"We'll get there, then, before we shake. For strength and awkwardness you lay over the deck; but if I had wanted your scalp all I had to do at any time was to plug and then pull. Now, I want to know what it was all about."

"That's good, hog sense, an' I don't mind tellin'; fur you look ez though you'd b'leve ther truth when yer hear it. Fact are, I'm a poor, misfort'n' twin, ez you've a'ready heerd me howl. I hev ther muskle an' Sammy, he hez ther brains. Yer pinch him, an', lawsee, don't I shout! Don't make no diff'rens ef it's ten mile off, ef he sez, come, I got ter git—ef he sez stan' still I got ter stan', ef I freeze. Fur all that Sammy's a good boy, an' when I heered he were taken in outen ther wet it made me madder ner a wet hen what hed lost her las' chick. An' they tole it were a man named Derringer Deck ez took ther trick, an' I'd find him at Brad Awl."

"Who told you?" interrupted Bright, only half inclined to believe this singular story.

"Now yer got me. It war a feller I met permis'us-like over at ther camp ov Roarin' Fork. He heerd me inquirin' ef they'd sech a man go by, an' he sez, 'Why that's ther pictur ov ther men ez they planted et Roger's Ranch las' week. Hed a frolic with a rooster called Derringer Deck, that shot 'em outen his sleeve while they were a-chinnin'. He went on ter Brad Awl, an' I reckon he's thar now.' When he sed that I went on ter Brad Awl too, intendin' ter mash him. An' so I'd er done, ef I hedn't found I'd missed ther lead."

"In your mind, perhaps," interrupted Bright. "I never saw your brother; but what convinced you that some one had been playing roots on you?"

"I heerd Sammy callin'. He wasn't no more dead than you be; an' I started hot-footed."

"But what did yer stop for?"

"Cause Sammy told me ter stop. That's ther wu'st ov it. He does it sometimes; an' then furgits all about it. He's somewhere's 'round, 'live an' kickin'."

"Then why don't you look for him? It's my opinion that he's in a heap bad scrape, and that the friendly cuss at Roaring Fork knows more about it than he let on."

"Look! Ain't I lookin'? When I git ther blud a-riotin' through my legs ag'in I'll go. Hev yer any idear how long I stood thar? Week, year, five minnits? I don't jes' remember how I kin, er when I got thar. An' Sammy may be lost, er he may be ten mile off, but—hush! I hear him callin'. I'm comin', Sammy!"

He jumped up again, rushed forward a dozen paces, then fell forward at full length, seeming to push his right arm up to the shoulder into the solid ground as he exclaimed:

"Gi'n us yer paw, Sammy; I'm hyer."

And, as if in answer, the astonished Deck Bright heard a single, low moan.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DARING VENTURE.

AFTER the one groan there was perfect silence, and it looked as though, if Derringer Deck had not been there, the mystery, such as it was, would have remained forever unsolved. Ananias had again lapsed into one of his trances, and lay where he had fallen, like one bereft of life.

"What's the matter now, old man?" asked Bright, stooping over the giant. "I reckon we've hit the home base at last; now let's call for the score of the game."

Mr. Jawler remained quiet; but Bright had not the patience to once more wait for the uncertain moment when he might return to consciousness. Time was too precious. He caught Ananias by the shoulder and waistband, unceremoniously dragging him away. Then he stooped down to investigate.

In a huge boulder, that was flush with the ground from the side of their approach, there was a narrow rift. How deep it extended was not apparent; but, beginning to believe that Ananias was by no means the colossal liar he had at first thought him, Derringer Deck guessed pretty closely what was to be found at the bottom, though a glance showed that there was nothing to be seen from there.

The boulder, however, jutted out into nothingness, since it hung over the brink of a precipice. Leaving Ananias senseless where he had flung him, Deck stepped forward and looked over.

He drew back reflecting:

"Lucky for him that he wanted to take the shortest cut. If he'd made about three steps more he'd have gone over head-first, and been flat as a pancake. If there's anything in this, and if there's any way to get it out, the real shortest cut is somewhere from below up. Begins to look to me as though I'd found something more than a mare's nest; and mighty lucky that I struck the festive Jawler when I did. Let me see."

The canyon below was more like a gash than anything else. At twenty yards' distance it would have escaped observation altogether, and certainly under few other circumstances would Bright have thought of exploring its narrow depths. Without even a rope to aid him, it seemed as though he had no slight or safe task, for as far as he could see on either hand the barranca's sides were as clean-cut as at the spot where he stood.

Nevertheless, as he bent over he saw a dangerous chance that he promptly decided to take.

From a point in the side wall, that seemed to be about twenty feet below him, a small tree jutted out, and then upward. If there was a recess under the boulder, he had no doubt but that it was not far from that spot; and he believed that if he was willing to run the risks, and could keep his head cool, he might manage to reach the trunk of this tree from above.

To get back promised to be more difficult; but that part he refused to consider. He gave a glance at Ananias, mechanically touched his weapons, and then, with a rash daring, set out upon his dangerous journey.

The edge of the rock was sharply defined, and though it sloped a little outward that circumstance was somewhat in his favor. Even the slight support thus given him was something.

Swiftly yet with care he lowered himself until he was hanging by one hand, and then he unclasped his fingers and dropped.

The slightest miscalculation might have been fatal; but he made none. As he touched the tree his leg curled around it, there was a little jar, and his downward progress was arrested.

"The first trick made," he said, lightly; "now, if I've got off my eggs there'll be more fun than pleasure in the rest of the game. Unless that semi-lunatic up there comes to his senses and has brain enough to help me out I may have to scramble down—for I'll swear I can't get up. And it's about five thousand miles to the bottom, with no knowing what sort of a landing place there is. No, I thank you, I don't just prefer going that way. Let's see what the chances are. Business first and pleasure afterward."

He had hesitated a little with that natural indisposition to know the worst, but he did so no longer. The man that could look down from that perch without having his head swim, was bold enough for almost anything.

But the first glance gave him a welcome sense of relief since it showed him that that far at least he had not been mistaken in his calculations. There was the ledge, as he had expected it, and the opening extending into the rock, and perhaps widening into the cave; while up from the very center of it he could trace the cleft upon which Ananias had fallen senseless.

"There she is; but how to reach it, that's the question—'copperheads an' coal ile, yes,' as our friend William Bender of Black Dam would remark. Let me see. There's a convenient cleft or two in the rock, and a chance to shift along by one's hands until he reaches them. Then, if there are no slips—and this is a case where slips couldn't go over—it's possible to climb up to the ledge. After I get there I'll be ready for a rest; and here goes."

While soliloquizing he had been viewing sharply the proposed path, and now he swung himself off.

Little need to tell how he changed the face of the rock, gradually working his way toward the spot where the last supreme effort was to be made. He did it, and finally drew himself up on the ledge, which proved to be three or four feet higher up than he had thought.

For a moment he could see nothing, for his exertions and suspense brought on a correspondingly severe reaction. Conquering the weak-

ness, he raised himself on his hands and knees, and stared anxiously into the little cave.

He could hardly repress a shout of triumph. He had gone into the chase for Sammy Jawler in very serious earnest; and here, without much chance for doubt, he had found him. Well back from the opening he saw the form of a man, lying motionless.

If it was the younger Jawler, he was in a very bad plight, as an immediate investigation showed. His face had a pinched, dead look, and round and round his arms and legs was wrapped a lariat, that would most certainly have restrained him from motion had he been able to make it. His face was cold to the touch, and for an instant Bright was afraid that he was dead.

His first movement was to undo the rope. Whether the man died or not the cord was the one thing Derringer Deck wanted, and there were certain limits to his reckless philanthropy. His strong fingers worked rapidly, and in an unexpectedly short time the last knot was undone.

The reason was simple enough. Though made to hold, they were the work of a sailor's hand. So Derringer Deck reasoned at least, and he was not one to be very far away.

"Blessings crowd thick and fast," exclaimed Bright, as he shook the flask that he had rescued from Ananias a short time before.

"If I hadn't clapped the brakes on the fellow that didn't need it, there would have been none left for the fellow who did—which is a strong argument against the reckless use of fire-water. Now comes the crucial test. If a dozen drops of the elixir don't bring him around, he's a gone Jawler."

Carefully he moistened the lips of the insensible man, allowing a few drops to slowly trickle down his throat, and then watching anxiously for the result.

It was not long in coming.

"Alive, by mighty!" exclaimed Bright; and like a faint, 'way-off echo he heard above the voice of Ananias:

"I'm around, Sammy! Where the blazes are you?"

"Good enough! I've learned a lesson. Pour the fluid extract of corn into Sammy, and it does double duty. The same dose that would tune him up would reach the other twin and make him blind drunk. Poor fellow, he's not out of danger yet by a long sight. I shouldn't wonder if he was starving."

A little bit excited by the singular resurrection, Dick Bright let off his enthusiasm in this way, and then set himself seriously to mastering the situation. First, he called to the ramping Ananias, and in a very few words convinced him that his brother was there and alive. Then he explained his intentions and after a cast or two threw the one end of the lariat into Jawler's hands, knotting the other end under Sammy's shoulders.

"Hold tight up there, I'm coming!" he exclaimed, and at an answering signal he sprung up the rope rapidly, mounting hand over hand with practiced skill.

Once more Bright stood on the face of the boulder, and choking off present questions, gave the signal to haul away.

In another minute Sammy Jawler lay in his brother's arms.

"Go slow, little infant. He's not as strong as a three days' old baby, and if you put too much strength in those hugs you'll shut off his wind altogether. You retain your linen and quietly dance around a little while I finish up the job. Lucky I've got a few hard-tack in my pocket, and there's still some more whisky in the jar. If he's not too bad hurt you can have the contract of toting him all the way to Brad Awl. And he don't look as though he would make you much of a job. There's not much of him."

"All brains, every durned bit ov him brains. Oh, he's a comin'—he's right hyer, now!" enthusiastically shouted Jawler, as he danced around. "He ain't much ter look at; but we two make sech a team! An', stranger, you ain't no slouch. Ef ther Jawler twins don't make it solid fur you yit, call me a double-headed liar. Jest see the baby grin. Oh, Sammy, I'm tickled ter death. I thort I'd lost yer."

It was a fact that Ananias had almost all the bone and muscle, for he would have tipped the scale at double the weight that his brother could have raised.

And it was not alone in size that there was such a radical difference in appearance. The one was rude, unkempt, uncouth; the other had a delicate, almost an effeminate face, and the little hands that Derringer Deck was slowly chafing between his own were soft, white and well kept. Under Bright's ministrations he opened his eyes and smiled.

"Now, then," said the young sport, briskly, "what's the matter with *you*? The sooner we know, the sooner we can set about bracing you up."

"Starved!" responded Sammy, in a husky whisper.

"Blamed if I didn't think it. A little brandy and cracker will help that, and then we'll allow this Hercules to tote you into Brad Awl. Rest and good chuck will make you all right by

morning. No bullet-holes, I suppose, or anything that way?"

"None that I know of. A bruise on my head; but that's nothing. A little more brandy, if you please. I'm stronger already. Here, Ananias. Shake, old man. I knew I could bring you if you weren't drunk as a biled owl. They can't keep the talented twins apart as long as one has legs and the other brains. I'll be ready to move pretty soon; and to-morrow we'll go on the war-path."

He was holding the hand of the giant as he ceased speaking, and there was such a look of satisfaction in his eyes that Deck Bright warmed to him even more than one naturally does toward a man he has just saved.

"Oh, yes; you'll be all right now, without a doubt, though it was ten chances to one against you if they really put you there for keeps. I don't want to be obtrusive, but, if it's not too much to ask, who *did* do it? He must have had more of the devil in him than most men, for he never could have guessed, what I that saw it can scarcely bring myself to believe. A tap on the head, or a bullet in the heart, would have been more merciful."

An ugly gleam came into Jawler's eye as he looked up.

"Colonel Coldsteel put me there; and he is a man without mercy."

CHAPTER XIV.

A MAN THAT LOOKED BOTH WAYS.

THE announcement of the younger Jawler was no great surprise to Derringer Deck. The whole thing looked like the work of the redoubtable road-agent; though why should he have taken so much trouble when a toss off of the brink of the canyon would have been more certain, and a great deal more speedy?

"Colonel Coldsteel, eh? He seems to be up to about all the devilment that is going on around here. Some day he will buck too far over the limit and Brad Awl will rally all hands for a grand drive. If it wasn't for the fellow-feeling I think they would have done it before this. How did you come to fall into his hands? Looks as though it must have been something more than an ordinary case. Did you drop a few of them, or didn't their find pan out as well as they expected?"

"It's too long to tell you now, my friend; though, if you care to hear the story, you shall, when I get a little stronger. Perhaps I downed a couple—I had a chance for a snap-shot, and I struck out once as they closed in—but it wasn't that. I'm the one man here that knows Colonel Coldsteel from boyhood up—the one man he has harmed beyond recompense. Both of us cannot live, and he knows it. For me to die, knowing that he was above ground, would be a torture in the death worse than saint or Satan could conceive. He knows that, and he took care, as he supposed, to leave me where I could have plenty of time to revel in it. I'm a quiet, pious sort of a fellow, doing good for evil, and all that, so I'm going to give him another chance. Don't I look like it—curse him!"

Derringer Deck looked down into the white face, and felt a little dubious about his answer. He had seen bad men enough in his time, yet this man, just rescued, as it were, from the grave, had, for an instant, the worst gleam he had ever seen in mortal eye.

"You don't answer. Good enough. You won't tell me I lie, though you know it; but you might say I was making myself sick on wind without being so far wrong. I said all that and more a year ago, yet he had me on the hip to-day, and may again. Now, who are you?"

The abrupt question startled Bright, for he had been thinking as he listened, and was unprepared for the quick transition. Yet he answered without hesitation:

"I'm a pilgrim at Brad Awl, with a side pard or two that are not showing up to the front—yet. If we don't get away with some of their wealth it will be because my luck has petered out, and skill is at a discount. As you're a stranger there it is not necessary to say anything more about it, though I'll give you a hint if I see we're both going for the same game, and if it don't happen to be big enough for two mouthfuls. In Brad Awl—and a good deal of elsewhere—I'm known as Deck Bright; and some of 'em have cut it short to Derringer Deck, the Man with the Drop. I should judge that covers the ground thick enough for the present. Some day when we change yarns, I'll give you the rest. Of course I don't want to have any nonsense with Mr. Coldsteel, but luck's against me. Last night I downed his horse, with the most innocent intentions in the world; and to-day I've met you."

"Ah, last night! You say you fired at him! How was that? Never do it again. Heaven is saving him for me."

"You may have him—unless I can get a sitting shot at him, from behind a tree. I don't meddle except when I have to. And, say: it strikes me that, as the flask is about empty and the crackers gone, the best thing for us to do would be to try moving. They may come back here to see if the job needs to be done over. Wake the agile Ananias up and let us perambulate."

"You are right. It is time that we are gone. Come, brother mine, give me a lift until my own legs seem stout enough to carry me. We are together again, and this time we'll stick. Had you been with me this would not have happened. That's right. Away we go."

Deck Bright had coolly resolved to accept as a fact the version the giant had given of the singular connection between him and his brother. He generally believed what he saw, and if he did that there was little room in the case, to doubt. Even the last ten minutes had borne their evidence. When Ananias had attempted to flounder into the conversation Samuel had simply waved his hand, and knit his brows for an instant.

That moment Ananias became as strangely quiet as if he was enchanted.

Now he sprung into life again. Catching up the form of his brother he threw it carelessly over his shoulder and strode away, with long, easy steps that made Bright hurry his pace to retain the position by his side.

This was kept up until the more uneven ground had been passed. Then Sammy Jawler, at a whispered order, was placed on the ground again, and though for a time he was a little staggers, by putting a hand on the arm of Deck on the one side and Ananias on the other, he managed to get over the ground at a pretty fair rate of speed.

Colonel Coldsteel and his party had apparently disappeared, since the three managed to find their way into Brad Awl without much delay, and with no interruption.

"Now, what are you going to do with me?" peevishly asked the younger person, his temper being by no means improved as his strength returned.

"Oh, if you've got nothing better I mean to take you right to the Ark, where I hang out. They mind their own business there, and keep a hotel. If you are willing, you shall be my guest until you have a chance to turn around."

"The Ark! What sort of place is that? Annie, old boy, you think it will suit my style? You were in the town and ought to know the ranches."

"Suit yer to a T; but it's too high-toned fur me. We never *kin* sail in ther same boat; an' I've got my campin'-ground picked. Go ahead. Ther leetle sport'll see you through. He's safe ter tie to."

There was a quiet admiration in his tone that ought to have pleased Derringer Deck, and perhaps it did; but he made no comment. Outwardly it moved him no more than did the rather ungracious reception of his proffered hospitality. As Brad Awl was just at hand there was not much chance for further discussion. They entered it in not very enthusiastic procession and moved straight upon the Ark.

It was well upon sundown when they reached the hotel, and by some strange fantasy of fate at that very moment Laughing Lil came airily out and was just stepping from the porch when she saw there for the first time together the three who halted in front of her.

Deck Bright felt the arm that was linked in his give a quiver, and then Jawler braced himself, while from Lil's lips dropped the exclamation:

"You—Samuel Jawler!"

Then, instead of waiting for greeting, or reply, she slipped nimbly by, and hurried down the street.

"Ah, so you know Miss Bascombe, and the recognition seemed quite mutual. Perhaps you can give us boys a point or two. We're dying to know where she comes from. We know who she is—the best and squarest female sport that ever worked the mines. Mike Mulloney knows the rest; but he won't tell."

"Hush," answered the other, in smothered tones. "Too much is coming at once. You may know more by and by. Not another word now; I cannot bear it."

"Of course, if you say so; I don't want to intrude. Here's my den. Make yourself comfortable until I can see the boss of the lay-out. He'll put you somewhere, and, gentle Annie, here, can attend to your wants till you get stronger. I've another sick man down town that I must take a look at, so don't think I'm neglecting you if I don't show up."

Derringer Deck was as good as his word; and then, having made a hearty supper, he slipped off to Ante Pete's where between questions, answers, and the story of his adventures with the Jawlers, the evening had received a pretty fair start when he got away and headed for Mad Mike's.

A little to his surprise almost the first man he saw there was the doctor, who was following in the wake of Colonel Thompson.

"I've squared it with Early Joe," he whispered, "and I rather suspect he will stand my friend. In case of emergency I am going to count on you. I suppose I may do it?"

"Don't trust me much more than the rest, and don't trust them at all. Then you'll come out about right. Anything fresh?"

"Nothing but what I have told you."

The two spoke only a few words, and in a guarded way, that was not likely to attract attention, but Colonel Thompson's eye had been

on Bright from the moment of his entrance, and disengaging himself from the man with whom he was conversing he came forward.

"See here, you; I don't want to make trouble in Mike's shebang but I'll have to talk plain if it burns the bark off. Brad Awl has no need for you."

"No?"

The monosyllable was about half a question, but was as cold as Thompson's address was hot.

"No, sir. I'm very sorry that my friend, the doctor, has to be the one man that fails to see you as you really are, and it is partly because he won't be warned that a few of us have decided, after a careful consideration of the affair last night, and all its points, that you've got to go."

"Where? Put it very plain, for I ain't as bright as my name would seem to make me."

The colonel's voice was raised to an angry pitch, while Derringer Deck's was low and quiet.

"Anywhere so you get out of this camp. From here you've *got* to move."

"In your mind, perhaps. I'm not aware that I've done anything in Brad Awl that any one could take offense at, except to kick you out of Ante Pete's last night after you'd taken a sitting shot at me, and missed. What you couldn't do then, when you had me alone, you can hardly do now, when there's a crowd around to see fair play. But if you think so try it on."

"That might be so if you had a chance to jump me again in the dark; but you won't have that here, and Brad Awl thinks as I do. I'm only running things. If you are wise you'll leave without making trouble. The most of them want to furnish you with a hemp necktie and a wooden overcoat."

"Then, what's all this chin about? Why don't they do it without giving me a show, for the white alley? Are you afraid of scaring your pigeon if you cut up too rough?"

Not very much show was he having if Colonel Thompson told the truth. The decks were cleaned for action, and a general call for boarders had been quietly passed around.

So it looked, at least. The tables were vacant, Laughing Lil was nowhere to be seen, while Mike Mulloney stood behind his bar, flanked by Rapid Johnny and another of his satellites, his arms folded over his breast, and very much of a bulldog look in his face. He knew what was up, and intended to take hold somewhere when the time came. If signs went for anything Derringer Deck's hour had about arrived, in Brad Awl.

"You're a cool hand, Colonel Thompson," continued Bright, "but even here they don't sentence a man until he's been accused of something; and the trial don't begin until there's a prisoner at the bar. If you think you are man enough to bring me there why don't you begin?"

"There is no rush, my young friend. It is just as well for you to hear beforehand how public opinion stands. It will save foolishness if you know that we mean it all, and that the very first move you make to resist down you go. Hands up, and surrender; we've got you covered ed."

"So you think; but the man behind me is looking straight into a forty-four caliber, and the first move either makes *I'll kill you both.*"

With a wonderful quickness Derringer Deck gave his right hand a flirt and from his sleeve dropped down into the palm of his hand one of the ugly little weapons from which he derived his sobriquet, its muzzle staring the colonel full in the face. Thompson neither winced nor grew pale.

"Shoot him, Bud," he shouted—coolly taking his own risks.

And from a few steps beyond Bright's shoulder came the answer:

"I dassn't stir. Ther durned cuss looks both ways. My hammer ain't drawed an' he's got me kivered."

Sure enough, the left hand of Derringer Deck had stolen behind him and now from under his coat-tail a pistol barrel lined Bud Bunker, while the derringer held the colonel at bay.

CHAPTER XV.

A REAL BAD MAN CHIPS IN.

THE advantage was with the little man of the spectacles; and it had been all the more readily obtained because his glasses concealed his eyes, and up to that moment the colonel had supposed that he had attracted his exclusive attention. The derringer lay in such point-blank range that he did not dare to move himself—and he had not intended to. How it came that Bright should be protecting his rear flank was a puzzle that he did not much believe in.

But at any rate it was a state of equilibrium that could not last long, dangerous to the three as its disturbance might, and Bright knew it well enough.

"Easy, my lord," he drawled, "and you, Bud Bunker, drop your tool and hold up your fingers. When I count three I fire. One, two—"

Down went the revolver to the floor, and up went a dirty pair of paws. Bunker had been selected, not for his sand, but for his willingness to take a shot at the back of an unsuspecting man. It was not every man that would be willing to accept such a job.

"That's right, Buddy. Now, colonel, I've got you foul!"

With a sudden, graceful bound, Deck sprung sideways and reached the wall, his left hand came to the front, the derringer disappeared, and he faced the crowd over two revolvers that were made for work.

How it was no one could tell, but the spectacles had disappeared, and a pair of clear, keen eyes seemed to take in every soul in the room as they shifted from one to another.

"Gentlemen," he continued, "I don't mean to rub too hard; but I see that if I want to stay in Brad Awl, as I intend to, this thing must be settled now. All I ask is a square deal and my hand to count for just what it is worth. I came here a stranger, with coin enough to carry me through, and I've done just what I saw the rest doing. I've stepped on nobody's toes, and haven't swindled a man-jack of you out of a cent. The whole town isn't here, but the rest of 'em generally go with the crowd at Mulloney's, so if I square it with you, I'm solid with the camp. Now speak out, cold and quick. What's the charge?"

The colonel had held his peace wonderfully well, but he had his reasons. He had never seen the dashing little sport shoot, but he did not doubt his abilities; and as his own courage had always been held above reproach he did not care to run any unnecessary risks until he was ready to move. If he spoke now he had a reason.

"You want talk with the bark on, and you may as well have it. We've got your measure, and we don't want you. If you didn't think it would be hard to prove anything against you, you would scarcely have trusted yourself here; but Brad Awl isn't large enough to hold a suspicious character, and after last night it is pretty clear to my mind and to those with whom I have talked that if you didn't attempt Miss Gordon's abduction yourself, you had something to do with it, and that what happened at Ante Pete's came right along in the programme. To-day you went up into the mountains, and tomorrow you'll have your gang here at the Ark. If we don't hang you it's because my friend and his daughter have begged you off; but any way you've got to go."

A little cry—a woman's voice—interrupted him; and right after the cry, at the other side of the room, there was the noise of a blow, the sound of a falling body, and the crack of a pistol. After that a sharp, quick voice:

"No you don't Mr. Bunker. I'm the real bad man from Bitter Creek, and that's my side pard you're laying fer. Stand back here, you Brad Awl sinners, and let a white man talk. What's the game, Deck? Shall I open my batteries; or do you want to hold them level all yourself, alone? This tough citizen was just taking good aim when I gave him a love-tap and saved your bacon. Speak up. What's it all about?"

Sammy Jawler strode forward with a quick, confident step, and behind him slouched the other talented twin, the original Ananias. It was a reinforcement by no means to be despised. One man with grit and skill can sometimes hold at bay a crowd that is not actually raving; and three good men, back to back and pistols drawn, make a respectable army. That they were ready for a shin and full of work was proved by the prompt way in which Sam had knocked down Bud Bunker who, having got out of the range of his eyesight, was about to take a felon shot at Derringer Deck.

"One good turn deserves another," he continued, as there was a momentary hesitancy. "This afternoon he saved my life when that infernal Colonel Coldsteel and his gang thought they had me booked sure fer a voyage up the flume, and to-night, if you'll give me the chance I'll return the compliment or step over the range with my best boots on. How is that, say you?"

He looked straight at Thompson as he spoke, and shot the last few words at him like the cracking of a pistol.

"Howld yer whilst, kurnel dear," interrupted Mike Mulloney, fer the first time, speaking. "Sure an' it's all chin-chin an' no foightin'. Whin Oi sed go ahead wid ther cattle show Oi meant somethin' quick an' div'lish, an' didn't m'ane yez ter be afther shtoppin' me business all noight. Oi say forninst me the mon they say bu'sted me winder. Oi'm a p'aceable mon but Oi want its valley er his blud on ther flour."

"Here you are, two or three times over. I'm the man that made him do the trick; and we dropped in here expressly to pay the damages. There's nothing small about Sammy Jawler. Next!"

As he spoke, the young man tossed a big gold coin over upon the bar, with a skill that made it drop and stop right in front of Mike.

"That sames honest loike, anyway, an' takes the blud out av me eye. Yez towld us this young man saved yez frum Kunnel Cowldstale. Ef he did, it's not his fri'nd he is at all, at all; an' may be it's the wrong thrack ther b'yes hez bin barkin' on. Prove it, an' this coourt stan's adjourned onless ther joodge there wants a wrastle wid ther boss tipstave."

"Your head's level, Mike. If you want to give the rooster fair play, I'm with you."

Early Joe had come in a moment before the Jawlers, but by this time had obtained a fair inkling of affairs and ranged himself alongside of the proprietor with an alertness that seemed to say he had totally forgiven the rough handling of the night before.

"It's not much of a story I have to tell," said Jawler, seeing that he had the floor. "I was on the way to Brad Awl, and fell among thieves. Coming through the 'nine mile cut-off,' I caught a glimpse of some masked skulkers and had only a chance for a snap shot when they raised on me. I guess I was thinking about something else; but may be they're only the smartest men I ever met. At any rate they had hold of me before I could jump Jim Crow. I knocked one down, and only hope I broke his cursed neck. When I came to, I found myself tied hand and foot and the leader of the gang bending over me.

"I'm sorry fur you, Sammy," he said. "You an' me he's met afore an' I allers aimed ter stand up an' kill yer like a man. Unfortunately, life's got too precious sence I struck it rich, an' ez I can't afford ter run ary reesks an' want ter give yer ther full wu'th ov yer money, I'll put yer away whar nothin' kin disturb yer pi'us meditations. That's jest ther chance that some one kin find yer; but if they don't you'll starve ter death like a leetle man, an' Colonel Coldsteel 'll be even at last."

"So he talked, his voice all the time carefully disguised, and I never seen his face; but there was only one man living he could have been, and that is a man who once wronged me beyond all forgiveness—the man I'll kill yet or lie as a man never yet lied over a solemn oath.

"They carried me off then and stuck me away in the rocks to starve to death. I gave up once or twice; but my sand came back and I called for Ananias as well as I could. They had hurt me worse than they thought and I fainted again more than once, but between times I called for Gentle Annie—and he came. He had had a riot with this same Mr. Bright, right here, and you all saw how he quit when he heard me shouting."

"Oh, sthop! You make me toired!" exclaimed Mulloney. "Av yez wor berried under ther rocks nigh ther cut-off, how c'u'd yer brither hear yez hyer?"

"A very natural question, but one easily answered, and the answer proved: If I can give a guess at where he is, he can hear me a hundred miles. But he never would have found me if Mr. Bright had not followed him and risked his life to get at me. If any one doubts, I can show them the blood on the road in the cut-off, and take him to the spot where they stored me away to starve. Bright shared his flask with me, helped to carry me to Brad Awl; and now I'd be worse than a Digger if I didn't take up for him when I see him in trouble. When you hit him, you've got to slap me, and we'll all strike back hard till you listen to reason."

Early Joe was listening with interest, and took upon himself to reply:

"It's a purty tough yarn you've spun, but we'll believe the rest if you'll prove what you say 'bout that brother ov yourn. He mou't hear 'round ther corner ov ther house, but ye can't make me take no stock in ther five or ten mile apart."

"No, I suppose not; no one does until he sees the matter tested, unless they've heard before of the talented twins. I don't have to hollow very loud, either. As I say: I have the brains, and Ananias the muscle of the family. What I think, he does, or makes as good a stagger at it as there is in the world. If you or any other man don't think so, I've got rocks to put up that I can prove it."

Early Joe might have taken up the defiance had he been allowed the time to speak; but Colonel Thompson broke in ahead of him:

"Here's a hundred dollars that you can't prove anything of the kind. If you win, I for one will agree to take your cock-and-bull story for Gospel. If you lose, we'll count you in along with that other fraud, and rule you out of Brad Awl."

"Done; and Mulloney shall hold the stakes and decide."

"Go outside, Annie. When you hear me calling, you'll know what they want done."

In perfect silence the giant hulked out, and there was a little whispering at the bar, to which Sam Jawler advanced with perfect carelessness, listening with a cold smile on his face to the proposed test, which was unheard by any save the three.

"All right. You'll see there's no hocus-pocus about this, for he'll do it and I'll never say a word. Time!"

With his arms folded and his back toward the door the stranger stood, his eyes half closed and a smile on his lips. If any one had wanted to take him off his guard it looked like an elegant opportunity, only that Mad Mike, as if anticipating the possibility of some such movement, transferred a navy six from the convenient shelf below, to the top of the bar, where it lay just at his hand. The action was a hint for fair play, and it brought a terrible look of rage to more than one face.

Promptly at the signal to go Ananias re-entered.

His face wore the look that Derringer Deck had seen there more than once, though his eyes never turned toward his brother.

Without an instant's hesitation he stepped behind the bar and pulled open a little draw, from which he took a pack of cards that had never been opened.

Turning them face-upward he ran them off until the tray of diamonds was reached.

This he held up so that first, Mulloney and the colonel could see, and then the rest.

Turning away he stalked to the further end of the room, the crowd, uncertain of what was to happen, falling away on either side, leaving a little lane.

At the wall Ananias halted, set one hand down on the floor and slowly reared his feet up until, end for end, he was perfectly upright. Then extending his left hand he held the card against the wall face out, so that all could see the pips.

As he did so Sam threw up his hand and fired on the instant; and then as quick as his finger could work the trigger fired again, but to his second shot there was a double report, a little louder and just a shade later.

"Don't worry," laughed Derringer Deck, still holding in his hand the smoking pistol he had just discharged. "I shoot myself, sometimes, and I couldn't stand it to see you having all the fun. You'll find the third spot gone all the same as if you'd done the work, and if I hadn't done it then a little later there might have been a spoiled shot. Gentle Annie's hand has begun to tremble. You'd better let him get down before something gives way."

There was one flash in Jawler's eyes, as he suspected treachery; but before Derringer Deck had finished speaking he could see that no harm had been done, and was himself again.

"The money's yourn," said Mulloney quietly. "You've done ivry bit axed, an' throwed in some purty shootin' besides."

"A square decision by a square man. Thanks. Set them up for the house."

The mandate was instantly obeyed, the house accepting unanimously. Even Colonel Thompson stepped forward, without a sign of disappointment on his face.

"Here's to better acquaintance," he said, raising his glass. "After all, I made a profitable investment when I proved that we had a worthy acquisition in our new citizen. I hope he has come to stay."

"You bet he's come ter stay," chimed in a voice that had not been so thickened by rum as to have altogether lost its capacity for enthusiasm. "Why it's me old side pard, Sammy Jawler of Sacramento, an' a snifty young sport be he; copperheads an' coal ile, yes. Don't tell me yer disremember Ole Billy Bender frum Black Dam."

The judge had been keeping prudently in the background until the danger seemed to be over, but now he shambled forward, and extended his dirty paw with a confidence that never deserted him, though it had been rejected by every pilgrim that had struck the town from the hour that Billy had made his first appearance at Mike Mulloney's. Which was the more genuinely surprised, he or the bystanders, it would be hard to say when Sam Jawler, clasping the hand in a hearty grasp, exclaimed:

"If it ain't William Bender, the old hero of Slaughter Bar and Glory Gulch!* If I had known you were around I should have felt certain of fair play. Why, they talk about you yet at the Bar, and the way you used up the Bullion Boss! I can guess what brought you here. You're going to have a shy at— But mum's the word. It won't do to spoil business, and you're the very man I'm looking for to help me over the rifle. And now I've got you I'll bet a coin as big as a cart-wheel that you'll be no good when I tell you the news that I'm sure you haven't heard yet."

He stopped and looked Bender full in the face; while the bystanders were uncertain whether they were to shout with laughter, or take Billy Bender for something a great deal better than they had given him credit for ever being.

"Go on," said Bender, uneasily. "You wouldn't be playin' any skin game on a pore ole man like me, would yer now?"

"No poor old man about you, Judge Bender. Your brother Ephrain, back East, is dead, and you are heir to a million dollars. I mean it, gentlemen," he continued, turning to the crowd. "That's part of my business here, to look him up, in the interest, perhaps, of the other heirs, if he had hopped the twig. Maybe you won't believe it, but Daddy is a millionaire; and I have had the pleasure of carrying the news."

CHAPTER XVI.

JUDGE LYNCH'S FIRST SESSION AT BRAD AWL.

At the astounding—to them—announcement, the crowd was silent for a moment, and then broke into a ringing shout.

"Oh, I assure you it is very true," said Jawler, as the applause moderated. "So true that the old man will be ruffling around in broad-cloth and fine linen a month from now, and go-

* See "The Lightning Sport," Dime Library No. 192, and "Captain Cutsleeve," Dime Library No. 229.

ing in to see Jim Keene, and the rest of that gang back there, for old acquaintance' sake. Till he can get away from here I'll be his banker as long as my chips last; and for the very first thing, in the judge's name, I'll ask you all up again, to drink the health of our oldest inhabitant, at his expense. Keep an account of it, judge, so that you don't dispute my bill."

But the judge was almost past keeping an account. For the first time in the memory of Brad Awl whisky had, for him, lost its charms. His fingers unclasped from the brimming glass he had mechanically poured out, while Sam Jawler was talking, and he staggered back into a seat.

"Pore leetle Eph," he whined. "Ef Ellen war only livin', but now it don't make no differens. Ellen's gone, an' Eph's gone, an' Daddy's left all erlone ter spend ther money."

Then his arms dropped on the little table that was convenient, and his head on his arms, while he fairly blubbered with grief.

It was a rough crowd around there; a hard crowd, in spite of the leaven of seeming respectability. If Mr. Bender and his wealth had been in an unfrequented place, there were a good many there who would have been willing to kill the one to obtain possession of the other. Yet there was not a soul that laughed. Just at that moment too many of them were thinking of those left behind, who might be dead and buried, and they never knowing it.

The rest had a respect for the millionaire, and designs on his pockets.

The fire-water went down, however, and there was a Babel of voices, each man trying to get an answer to his questions in regard to the far-away fortune.

Sam Jawler listened with a smile of good-humor, and was waiting for an opportunity to get a few answers in, when there was a yell outside that attracted attention, even from that excited crowd.

The door flew open, and in rushed a Brad Awl tough.

"Say, boyees, ye'r missin' ther fun. They've got ther heathen Chinee treed up ter Uncle Johnny's, an' ef yer wants ter help ter hang him yer got ter come right erlong. He's heeled an' drunk, an' shoots like a house afire!"

Derringer Deck had exaggerated the night before, when he talked of carrying stiffs into Uncle Johnny's; but he had helped in a wounded man, and now the ruction seemed to have broken out again in the same place, and he was every whit as anxious as he was then to be around at the fracas. He had been quietly allowing Sam Jawler the place in the foreground, but at hearing the intelligence he evinced a greater excitement than when threatened himself. Without waiting to see how the crowd would receive it he dashed through the doorway and sped along the street.

After him, however, streamed the delegation from Mike Mulloney's with the twins well to the front, and Billy Bender soon puffing away in the rear.

As Derringer Deck neared the spot where the crowd had collected he almost ran down a man who was leisurely proceeding in the opposite direction.

The man gave a howl of surprise and pain, even while he threw his arms around Bright's neck, in that way, though both staggering, neither falling. As they dropped apart again Ante Pete exclaimed:

"Go slow, Deck, it's a friend! Where in the name of wrath are you driving in such a hurry? Hope you ain't going to chip into that racket of Uncle Johnny's. Turn around and go back with me. I've something to tell you to open your eyes."

"Hist! There's no time for foolishness; and it's straight to Uncle Johnny's that I'm going. Get your horse and bring him around to the Ark, and do it quick as though your life depended on it. Mine probably does. If I have to leave town run things the best you can, and freeze on to the Jawlers fer pards; but don't you trust 'em too far. I'll depend on you."

Bright ran on in one direction; and Ante Pete, seeing that he could not stop him, ran in the other. He would have liked a little more explanation; but understanding that he could not obtain it was ready to obey his friend's request to the very letter.

Uncle Johnny was a moderate sort of a man—and he kept a moderate sort of a shebang. A pack of greasy cards was frequently shuffled there, but anything like solid gambling was seldom done; and as far as he was able he avoided being afflicted with chronic loafers. He preferred the customers that dropped in, took their poison, and then passed on. Now and then he had an invasion of toughs; but as a general thing the place was remarkably quiet for a Brad Awl gin-mill. As the old man's profits were large and his expenses small he was making more money than he got credit for, and had less trouble than the average citizen.

On this particular evening his ten-by-twelve saloon was more than ordinarily quiet. The boys were engaged elsewhere, and the old man was contentedly smoking his pipe behind the bar when he heard the report of a pistol, apparently fired at no great distance from the spot.

"I don't jes' guess it's ther heathen Chinee

az'in," remarked Uncle Johnny calmly, after he had ejected a dozen smoke rings from his capacious mouth. "More like it's some ov the boys carousin' down street, lettin' off the guns ter git ther right pitch fur ther hull band ter strike up. I hearn thar war goin' ter be fun down ter Mike's. I'm glad it ain't hyer. I war afeard on it las' night fur awhile, but he war sharp ernuf ter keep outen ther way. Thar's monstr'us bad men hyer, an' they do hate a yaller nigger. I don't see how he pulls through at all."

Then Uncle Johnny sighed, and betook himself again to the solace of his pipe, though his ear was cocked up, listening for a repetition of the sound.

It did not come; but something else did.

With a sudden burst the door swung open and a man actually flew in, stumbling heels over head, and measuring his length on the floor just in front of the bar.

For all his sleepy ways and good-natured drawl Uncle Johnny was always ready to protect his property. His pipe went to one side, and he snatched up a cudgel with which he was generally able to terrorize the lesser lights of Brad Awl.

As he flourished the club, however, the man on the floor turned something like a neck-spring, and came up in a sitting posture, at the same time jerking out two revolvers which he flourished wildly.

"Hi-yah, whoopee! Me dlunkee allee samee 'Melican man, way uppee. We Wailo an' he 'volver lounde ebley time, laise melly bobbly shootee plum centlee. Lip, slip! Set 'em uppee 'g'in! Yah!"

"None ov that hyer, heathen. Jes' pick yerself up, sixes an' all, an' git, er they'll be war hyer."

The command was not obeyed as promptly as it was given, though the muzzles were lowered. We Wailo simply turned his face sideways, while his grin was more idiotic than ever, as he listened, not to the old man, but to the noise in the distance outside.

Uncle Johnny listened also; and could hear a shouting and trampling of feet as of an approaching crowd.

"They're comin', sure ez guns, an' they're after you. It's too late now fer you ter git away, an' yer jes' a dead nigger."

The danger appeared to somewhat sober the Chinaman. He staggered to his feet, turned completely around once or twice, in an aimless sort of way, and then found himself propped against the further wall, a revolver dropping from either hand, and his bright little almond eyes showing the fear he felt.

"Unkle Johnnee hide We Wailo him give him heapse fai' tolla'. Him so dlunkee no can do him ploud. Wantche him maskee solee then him maskee Blad Awl howl."

"Go way!" shouted Johnny, and then through the doorway burst the men who had followed the Chinaman thither.

"Hyer he be, boyees!" yelled the foremost. "Bring on yer rope, an' we'll string him right up from Uncle Johnny's chimby. He won't murder no more white men—not much."

He had caught sight of We Wailo, and in his enthusiasm dashed straight at his throat.

Without even raising his hand the Chinaman gave a quick turn to the muzzles of his weapons, there was a flash and a roar, and down went two men, while We Wailo darted up the little ladder in one corner of the room, which served as a stairway to the half-story above.

A new leader sprung to the front, who darted forward and tore away the ladder.

"Go slow, boyees!" he cried, as three or four shots were fired at the orifice through which We Wailo had disappeared. "We've got him now, sure thing. Keep him thar tell we gather ther crowd an' then we'll swing him. He can't git away, but he may give some on yer ther last sickness ef yer crowd him too clost, tell yer hev drawed his teeth. We'll smoko him out when ther time comes, but while ther boyees are gatherin' we'll hev a jamboree on tin wheels. Set 'em up, Uncle Johnny!"

A little back from the door above crouched We Wailo, watching the open trap, with his revolvers ready for the first head that showed itself. If the crowd had attempted to follow no doubt he would have sent more than one dead man staggering back and down. And on the other hand had the crowd below chosen to try further pistol practice on the ceiling it is just as likely that sooner or later a shot would have reached him, without his being able to get in a return.

This was no ordinary jangle, that Uncle Johnny could quell with his club and a few harsh words, leaving the majority of the crowd on his side. Though the Chinaman had been skipping around Brad Awl for a week he had been almost as ubiquitous as a flea, and so the camp had contented itself with promising what it would do if it fairly got hold of him.

Now the camp had got him; and meant to keep him. He had shot a man or two, and so, instead of being driven out, his headstone was to be a standing memorial, to warn other Chinamen of the danger of freshness when attempting to settle in Brad Awl.

Uncle Johnny had no time to consider. The order for drinks was peremptory and all things considered it was as well to keep in with the crowd. Though the barrel might suffer he might save his house when they smoked We Wailo out of his place of refuge.

Leaving a couple of the cooler heads outside to watch for any attempted escape in that direction, the rest thronged the room, with utter contempt for a possible fusilade from the tried Chinaman, sampling Uncle Johnny's benzine while they waited for the reinforcements wanted before they opened the court, which it was decided was to be held over the already convicted criminal.

Brad Awl had gathered rapidly, the rest of the ruff-scuff being there before the deputation from Mike Mulloney's reached the ground; and the mob was red-eyed, and showing its fangs. Delay was about over.

"Put up ther ladder, an' let's have him out. Ef he humps' hisself we'll burn ther old pen down, an' him along with it!"

That was the cry started, and perhaps the latter part might have been carried out at once, without running the risk, had it not been for the proprietor.

He was not particularly incensed at We Wailo but he had strong objections to losing his property. Coming out from behind the bar he laid his hand on the arm of the self-appointed leader, Tom Bradley.

"Say, Tom, I'm an' ole man, an' ef this thing goes on it's goin' ter break me all up. An' ther ain't no sense in runnin' risks when it kin all be fixed, an' you let right down on ther, heathen afore he knows it. Ef you'll put some hyer, ez will look arter ther barrel an' ther rest, I'll take yer whar yer kin git ther drop right on him, an' ef he don't kin down yer kin fetch him."

"Done, old man. I'm engineerin' this hyer circus, an' I want ter hev it did accordin' ter Gunter. Thar's Quiet Billy 'll look arter things ez though they war his own, an' turn yer ther right change back. Now, drive on."

"Bring yer rope then, an' have 'em begin firin' when we're ready ter sail in frum ther other side."

"Hyer's yer rope. We'll fix it up all right."

With a very few words it was arranged. At a given signal the fusilade was to begin, and We Wailo's attention thus attracted from the attack that was planned for his rear.

To effect this required very little strategy.

At the gable end of the loft there was a shutter, secured by a padlock on the outside; and Uncle Johnny had another ladder by which the opening could be reached. The loft was divided by a partition running across the middle, and the supposition was that the Chinaman, crouching near the opening for the stairway, could be surprised.

"Then yer kin run ther ladder outen ther winder, an' have a mighty convenient place ter stretch ther hemp. Trees is skeerse in Brad Awl, an' the ladder 'll be better ner ther chimby."

So suggested Uncle Johnny; and the result proved that he was by no means contemptible as a strategist; though the crowd was too far beyond restraint to carry out his plan in perfection.

One shot We Wailo did have, and then, with a roar and a rush, the crowd from below pushed its champions forward, while Tom Bradley, and a couple more determined men broke in from the gable window.

A yell of delight announced the capture was complete, and then lawlessness triumphed utterly.

"What's ther use ter waste time on ther cussed heathen? We know he's did it, an' ef he hed ther chance he'd do it ag'in. String him up!"

So the cry was started, and as there was no cool head there to gainsay, We Wailo was doomed to a short rope and a shorter shrift. The one ladder was run half-way out of the window and then held in its horizontal position by wedging the other ladder between its inner end and the comb of the roof. Then the rope was tied around his neck, his hands having been already pinioned, and the other end of the rope was fastened to the extemporized gallows.

Once fairly in the toils the Celestial made neither struggle nor outcry. He simply shrugged himself into a ball, and in that position was rolled out to the end of the ladder and launched off.

A cheer arose from the mob that was packed in the loft, and an answering cheer arose from the mob without, as the wretch dropped. Then came a shout of execration.

The ladder was unequal to the strain, and with a crash the victim came to the ground.

"It's only a rung broke, string him up again."

So the cry arose, though he lay in a motionless, and apparently lifeless heap.

"Yes, here's a horse! Set him up on that. We'll waltz him over the range in style. Clear the way fer an Arizona go-cart!"

A horseman pushed his way through the crowd, that fell back as he advanced.

And then Derringer Deck, stooping low in the

saddle, gathered up the crumpled form, and flinging it in front of him uttered a sudden yell. In response the mustang dashed away, swung around the corner of the house, stretched off at a sweeping gallop, and disappeared along the trail which led into the mountains.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CHUNK OF GRATITUDE.

THE movements of Derringer Dick had been so rapid and so unexpected that there was no general attempt to stop him until it was too late.

One man did catch at the bridle as he turned the corner, and held on with a dangerous grip; but just as Bright's hand darted back for his revolver, he saw Sam Jawler spring forward and strike a lightning-like blow, straight from the shoulder.

"Thanks!" shouted Bright, as the man went down, and then the animal he bestrode carried him out of reach, and speedily out of range.

There was no certainty about pursuit. The Jawlers were there, and his faithful friend Ante Pete, to discourage it, and it would probably be some time before enough mounted men could be gathered to make a force that would be at all formidable; yet as it would not be wise to fall into the hands of the crowd he had just cheated out of their prey, Derringer Dick pushed along at a pace as fast as he dared make and leave any reserve fund in case of an emergency. He was a couple of miles away before he thought it expedient to moderate his speed; and even then, he only allowed the mustang to slacken his gait into an easy gallop.

"Dead or not dead?" he asked sternly, the question falling with strange distinctness upon the lonely night air. "If dead, by heavens I'll go back and make Brad Awl wish it had never been founded. The accursed fiends!"

"We Wailo no co'pse—him on'y play pidgin. Supposey that tim' him dlop him kickee up bobely—banje stlike uppe. Him belongee smart inside. How fashion Dellinglee Deck ca'? No tinkli We Wailo hop' wun flind in Blad Awl. Dellinglee Deck him flind, t'at way uppee. Eh, c'hoi!"

The exclamation with which his address wound up was literally jammed out of him. The cords were still on his hands and feet and so, when Bright suddenly cast him overboard, he fell to the ground as solidly as though he was a sack of wheat.

There was no doubt about the genuineness of Bright's surprise; and it was not altogether caused by the fact that his question was so suddenly answered by the man for whose murder he had been ready to threaten the direst vengeance. For a moment or so surprise rendered him powerless to act; but it took more than a resurrection to unsettle Derringer Deck's nerves for any great time. Before the mustang had taken half a dozen bounds Bright's hand and voice had called a sudden halt. Tossing the reins over the mustang's head he sprung to the ground and hastened back to where We Wailo was lying.

Catching him by the neck he dragged him roughly up to a perpendicular position and eagerly scanned his features.

"By heavens, you are a Chinaman, sure enough! What's the meaning of this? What set you cutting up your didoes around Brad Awl? Were you tired of life?"

"We Wailo all hunkee dunkee. Him settee up chiefee, take Blad Awl, allee samee 'Melican. Now him golo slow."

"I hope you will. It's a nice mess you've got me into. Confound you, I've half a notion to leave you trussed up as you are, and take you back to camp. You deserve hanging; and I ought to be hung alongside of you for being a wretched idiot."

"Ting-ki? Dellinglee Deck no talkee leason ebley time. Him must hap got watta topside suppose him t'ink makee too bad for We Wailo. B'longee betta makee Chinee fien' some tim' findee plenty plopa pidgin. Eh?"

"I doubt if you'll ever be worth much, old man," answered Bright, laughing at himself now that his first burst of anger was over, "but it would be a crazy idea to make you suffer because I'm a fool. There. I'll cut the strings loose and you had better scamper off in some other direction. I don't think it would be healthy for you to be seen in that camp again; and I'll have hard enough time to hoe my own row without looking after yours."

"T'in-ki? Tat heap bettee. We Wailo no go back 'less him sent. Supposee Deck Bright wisee him no go back too. See him by-an'-by now. We Wailo fu'st chop, allee samee fung-hwang, no hab die, git up an' git, ebley timee. Hi yah!"

And then Deck Bright had a chance to see the folly of doing good, for the Chinaman, with a hop, step and jump, as it were, reached the mustang, caught the reins up, flung himself on the animal's back, and lying well over its neck so as to be thoroughly invisible, swept away like a whirlwind.

It might have been possible to have brought the mustang down by a pistol-shot, and Deck's finger was on the trigger in time for a trial; but he seldom shot unless certain of doing what

he wanted, and he held his hand. Instead of bursting with wrath, as one might have expected, he gave a quiet chuckle, and turned his face toward Brad Awl.

"Serves me right. I didn't even have sense enough to find out what he was doing at Pete's. Now there's nothing for me to do but to go back to town and take my gruel like a little man. My mind is easy on *that* score, and I can back Ante's hand now for all I'm worth. But if I tell him the truth *won't* he rave! I think I'll keep mum and buy him a new mount."

With such reflections as these as a send-off, Derringer Deck started on his return trip; and certainly it was the height of rashness that led him back among the wolves he had cheated of their prey.

He strode along with a strong, rapid pace, and had gone some distance when he heard the clatter of hoofs approaching, and had no doubt but that the men of Brad Awl were at last on his trail.

It happened that they could not have struck him at a better place, for right here the roadway was hung on a steep hillside, and as the pursuers were looking for a man on horseback they never thought that he might be lurking among the rocks a hundred yards above. As they clattered along they talked freely, and a little louder than was altogether prudent, for their words came quite clearly to the ears of one of the men for whom they were searching, though they supposed him to be far enough away.

"Say, I don't hear anything, an' I reckon this are jest an all-fool chase. He's four mile ahead an' still a-goin'."

"Betcher life," responded another. "He don't stop tell he gits well inter ther mount'ins—unless he's got pards a-waitin' fur him. Mighty onhealthy it must be, then, ef we did ketch up. I ain't afeard; but I sw'ar I don't see why we sh'ud be takin' all ther risk."

"That's so, an' I move we halt," said a third, reining in his horse as he spoke.

"There's suthin' durned queer 'bout the hull affair."

There were eight or ten horsemen altogether, and one after another they pulled up, wheeled, and rode back to the first one who had thrown up the chase.

"Ye'r' right thar. Thar's suthin' more than sing'ler. Who war ther man who chipped in ter save ther heathen? That's what I want ter know. Kinder sprung outen ther ground, an' did it so quick no one hed a chance to see who he were."

"Well, it's my 'pinion it war Kunnel Coldsteel er one ov his men ez zipped in ter help ther heathen out."

"Say hyer. S'posin' ther Chinee war Coldsteel hisself. How does that strike you fur high? Bin a-loafin' round Brad Awl ter git p'ints. Them war no-count galoots anyhow, an' it would be jest ther boss plan ter slide outer camp 'thout showin' his hand."

"A boss plan, but mighty reesky. Ef ther ladder hedn't broke whar w'u'd he 'a' bin now?"

"Jest where he is. You bet ther' war enuf ov his gang 'round ter cut him down. An' fur reesky—ain't that what he lives on? He's ther boss fur that; an' ef ther notion took him he'd soon ez not fight ther town."

"Ef yer think so then we're makin' dog-gone fools ov ourselves. We can't find him if we wanted to; an' we wouldn't want ter unless we're durned site bigger fools than they figger us up at."

"Prezactly, ole hoss. I move we go back."

"Back she be," and the last speaker, who was the one who had first come to a halt, wheeled his horse around and started off in the direction whence they had come, the rest following without hesitation or demur.

"Saved again!" exclaimed Derringer Deck, as the last man passed beyond ordinary earshot. "No one seems to have recognized me, and, if I can get back without being noticed, we can bluff them off slick as you please. Can swear that the rascals stole Pete's mustang and laid me out as I tried to stop 'em. It's better to be born lucky than rich—and I'm not sure that I was born either. Here's for a try at it, anyhow. I'll follow in the gulch from the further side, and strike in somewhere about Mulloney's. If the talented twins have got into a tangle on my account, of course I'll have to chip; but otherwise I've a good chance yet."

Tightening his belt, and dropping his elbows close to his sides, he started off at a rapid pace, though of course without any idea of being able to overhaul the mounted men ahead.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS GORDON'S CALLERS.

THERE is no doubt but that Miss Gordon, sustained though she was by a high purpose, found life at the Ark remarkably dull. About the middle of the day she had ventured on a short stroll, for the sake of the sunlight as much as anything else. Having had the sunlight, and found it uncomfortably warm, she went back, and felt very lonely, and a trifle nervous, when her father went off with Colonel Thompson in the evening.

After the little experience she had had, of

course it was not surprising that she should give an affrighted start at hearing a knock at the door of Doctor Gordon's room.

Being courageous she called out:

"Who is there?"

Then she cocked the revolver that was now her constant companion, and awaited the answer.

"A friend, who wants to give you a word or two of advice, if you are willing to hear it."

"You are aware that it is a woman to whom you are talking? My sex seldom takes kindly to counsel."

"I should hope I did. I waited until your father got out of the way. I don't want to run foul of him—just yet."

"Look out for your brains then. I am always ready to listen, when I can do no better; but at the first sign of nonsense I will take the law in my own hands. I will open the door, but stay out there and say your say."

She flung open the door.

"Now, who are you?"

"Ante Pete; and very much at your service. Last night you showed some little sympathy for me, and it was very sweet. To-night I am going to return the compliment without much hope that you will care."

The lamp shone full upon the face of the man standing in the hall. Miss Gordon surveyed him for a moment and then broke into a laugh that was low and musical.

"How absurd! Mr. Edgewood your masquerade is simply ridiculous. Can you imagine that it would deceive me? I knew you last night the moment I laid eyes on you. Do you think I would have shown as much interest in a simple stranger?"

"A thousand thanks. It was the uncertainty that was worrying me. Then you did care something specially for me? Oh, it is worth it all to hear even that much!"

"Nonsense, young man. Because you met me a few times at Glory Gulch and were not as absolutely hideous as the rest of mankind I met there is that any reason why you should employ such a tone to me? I can guess a good deal, and of course it made me feel uncomfortable to think that you had been brought here through any influence of mine to meet your fate."

"I met my fate in Glory Gulch," responded the young man, rather ruefully. "When I found you were coming here I tried my best to warn you against it, and if your father had not taken such a dislike to me I would have warned him. This is no place for you. Better for you to go back at once."

"That seems to be the universal opinion. We have had four or five warnings already. The one great objection to taking your advice is that we can't. Here we are, and here we remain until our aim is accomplished."

"Why will you be guilty of such folly? The investments made by your father have not so far amounted to much. He can afford to lose every dollar that he has placed in Brad Awl. Why wait until he is drawn soul and body into the clutches of these men, who are hungering for the wealth that they are too wicked to work for? Soon it may be too late for you to withdraw; for I tell you that, here there are few men who live a life in the interests of law and order. You came very near to being lost last night. Though, as you suspect, I am here in your interest solely, it is not very much that one man can do in such a camp as this—the only safe thing for you is to persuade your father to leave at once."

"Come in, Mr. Edgewood. I want to have a few words of conversation with you, which it is advisable that the rest of the world should not hear."

He accepted the invitation promptly enough, looking up at Miss Gordon with respectful wonder while she spoke:

"I ought not to confide in you, yet I hold you different from the rest, and it seems to me you ought to know. I do not ask you to respect my confidence, but I want you to understand that Gabriel Gordon and his daughter are not precisely as big fools as they seem to be."

"Please don't say it that way. If I thought your father was foolish in risking his life here, and worse than foolish in bringing his daughter along with him, I never thought the less of you for sticking to him as a dutiful daughter should. He needs some one, and though your coming made me angry, I could not help but respect you all the more for it. I would not care to risk my life for a woman I thought was a fool; and I put it at your service, how or when you may want it."

"Thank you for the offer; but I believe that we will be able to protect ourselves; and I can assure you that we do not intend to risk a dollar more than we are both willing and able to lose. I have a suspicion that you and your friend may involve yourselves in greater danger than threatens us, and for that reason I want to caution you to beware. Do not do it. It is for nothing—it must be for nothing."

"Do not speak so positively. Why should it be for nothing? Do you think that the few words you said to me at Glory Gulch could really discourage me? or that now, when we

have met again and you are in danger, that I can be turned away? No, indeed! You know that I love you, and I will never believe that I am altogether indifferent to you. I shall wait, and work and hope; if I fail in the end, I shall not even then admit that my labor has been for nothing. I did not intend that you should know that I was here, and perhaps might have kept myself hidden to the last, had you not come in upon me last night when I was off my guard. I could not be sure that you had recognized me, yet I believed, if you at all suspected, that it would after all be better to let you know that there was a friend near upon whom you might rely. If I have been too bold, pardon me. I shall intrude no more until your safety is so assured that it will not seem as though I wished to bargain over your necessities."

He stopped speaking and looked at her wistfully, as though half hoping that his words were doing his cause good, and that she might make some answer which would show it.

And on her side Ianthe's face was thoughtful enough, yet she had nothing to say that might give him hope. She held out her hand.

"You have had your chance to tell me what you had in your mind; after this we must be strangers. Do not forget that any interference of yours may only complicate matters to my harm. Good-night."

Their hands met for an instant and then the young man known as Ante Pete but addressed by her as Mr. Edgewood went away. She had asked him nothing about his wound—his appearance answered any possible question in regard to that—and she had even refrained from saying anything about the cause of the fracas the night before, though she could hardly guess that it was as much a mystery to him as to herself.

He was thinking about the woman he had just left, and so had no desire to see what was going on at Uncle Johnny's, being only too glad to evade the crowd. If he had not met Derringer Deck he would doubtless have gone to his shanty and remained there until the frolic was over.

The meeting with his friend changed all that. Without hesitation he obeyed the order; and was waiting in the shadow of the Ark when Derringer Deck came running up and hurriedly said:

"Keep out of the racket as much as you can. They're going to hang him at the end of the house, and I'm going to cut him down. If anything happens to me save the Chinaman if it costs your life."

Before a word of protest or warning could be uttered Deck was away, and Ante Pete was left to follow on foot; and see from a little distance the success of his friend's interference.

To his surprise no one had recognized the intruder, and the story of the man whom Sam Jawler had knocked down added such a confusing element that in a short time Edgewood could hardly have believed the naked truth himself. He went along with the crowd that followed the horsemen some distance out on the trail and was delighted to note that the prospects were fair for the fugitives to make good their escape. Had he known what was transpiring in Brad Awl he would hardly have been so jubilant.

When Ante Pete left her presence Ianthe closed the door and seated herself. She was still in a thoughtful mood, and though she heard something of the clamor of the crowd that was not very far away she thought little about it since she had slender reason to believe that it at all concerned her. It was only when the chorus arose after the sudden abduction of the prey that she raised her head to listen, understanding at last that there was something out of the ordinary on foot.

Listening then, she heard a quick footstep in the hallway, and as her eyes sought the door it opened and a man stepped briskly across the threshold, closing the door behind him.

"Halt there, who are you?" exclaimed Ianthe starting up. "By what right do you intrude here? Go back, or take the consequences."

She was less frightened than angry, and could scarcely believe that she had forgotten to slip the bolt after Edgewood's departure. From behind his crappe mask the man spoke:

"My dear little woman there can be no consequences. Every last soul in the house has struck out for Uncle Johnny's and you and I are left alone as storekeepers. I have come for you again, and this time I think I can pledge you my word that there will be no meddling fool to interfere. Pray accept the inevitable, and come along. If there is any trifle or so here among your traps you wish with you I can give you time to gather them up if you are quick about it and don't take too much. Submit gracefully, if you have sense. This time I mean to have you."

The man was as cool as an iceberg—and to his wonder perhaps, he found that he had met another just as cool, though a woman.

"Don't be too sure; it makes a man look so awkward to be tripped up after putting on airs. I assure you I have a very good pair of lungs, and when I scream they can hear me a mile. If you do not immediately retire I shall proceed to yell. My voice will lift the roof off of the Ark

and reach Uncle Johnny's without half-trying. After your failure of last night I'm not a bit afraid of you."

"I can almost believe it, and perhaps I should have exercised a little more caution; but this was the nearest approach to a surprise that I could manage, and after all it is boldness that wins."

"Exactly," said Miss Gordon, who had been talking to throw the man off his guard, if by any possibility it could be done. He was edging slowly toward her, watching her all the time like a hawk, yet his eyes left her for a moment as a sharp whistle came up from the street outside. When his glance flashed back Miss Gordon was looking straight at him over the leveled barrel of a cocked revolver.

"Another step and I fire," she sternly said.

"Ha, ha!" answered the intruder, and he bounded recklessly forward with outstretched arms.

CHAPTER XIX.

"TRY AGAIN" WINS.

IANTHE's finger tightened on the trigger, the hammer fell; but only a dull click followed. For some reason the cartridge failed to explode.

"Surrender, my dear; to struggle is useless. I had sense enough to see that your shooter was doctored before I risked my precious life. Say what you choose, women will sometimes kill."

He was entirely undismayed at her attempt, and yet he lied when he said that the pistol had been tampered with, for just as his hand caught her wrist and forced it upward, the hammer fell again, and this time there was a flash and a roar, though the bullet went spinning a foot above his crown.

Involuntarily he threw his head back, and just at the moment a man sprung through the doorway, and hit out hard at the base of his brain.

It was a good, solid blow, that one would have thought heavy enough to fell an ox, and if it did not bring the recipient to the floor it broke his hold on Ianthe's wrist, and dashed him against the further wall of the little room.

Then the latest arrival rushed forward, hitting as he came, again knocking back the man that, quick as a flash, had turned to meet him.

Miss Gordon, at the opportunity, darted out of the way, and from the doorway connecting with her father's room watched the fracas.

The new-comer was by far the smaller man, but he made up in pluck and skill what he lacked in size; and went straight in as though he meant business. He dodged a blow, and then sent in a very hot one, that, for the third time, staggered the other man. Unfortunately, in the maneuvering necessary for this, the way to the hall was left open; and advantage of the fact was promptly taken by the outlaw, who struck once, and then leaped past his antagonist, slammed the door behind him, and so disappeared. They could hear the noise of running feet, and after that the clattering of a horse's hoofs outside.

"Thank you very much," said Miss Gordon, coming forward with a flush on her face and with outstretched hand. "Though you are a perfect stranger to me, you certainly did all that I could have asked of the best of friends. Who am I thanking?"

"Sammy Jawler, miss, very much at your service. It's not very likely that you ever heard of me, for I am a stranger to the town, which I only struck this afternoon, by the assistance of a gentleman named Bright. Do not detain me. I did not care to use firearms here, but I may get a shot at him outside."

"Well, scarcely. At the rate he was going he is a mile away by this time. But I don't and won't blame you for getting a little excited in my cause. I should have fared very badly if you had not come, and gallantly taken my part against odds that some men would have scarcely cared to meet; though the man seems to be but a bungling ruffian after all. This is his second attempt, and his second notable failure, as well. I assure you I have been more interested than frightened, though I do not wish to decry your merit. My father will express his as well as my thanks to you in more extended form."

"No thanks are necessary, though I would truly like to meet Doctor Gordon. He needs some one to counsel him, I should judge. Certainly he and you have no business here."

"Thank you; but there is nothing new in that. We have heard such advice from half a dozen different directions—and we shall nevertheless continue to do as we please."

"Thet's so, pard. She's a holy terror when she cuts loose. Copperheads an' coal ile, yes. Ef I war you I wouldn't hev no more ter say ter her. I'm thinkin' she'll be mighty bad medercin' fur you; an' it's time, yer know, ez you an' me starts back East. I'll do ther square thing by yer, sure, an' don't yer furgit it."

It was the voice of Billy Bender, who seemed to have been quietly listening at the door. He had attached himself to the Jawlers, and appeared nervously anxious that Sam Jawler should not thrust himself into danger of any kind.

"Ah, you're there, are you?" said Miss Gor-

don, looking up. "I suppose a stranger can hardly complain if he is known by his friends. No doubt the judge from Black Dam has important business for your private ear, and is impatient at your lingering here. I will not detain you. Good-night."

Perhaps the young lady was a little impatient herself; at the strong hint Mr. Jawler turned to go. As he turned, however, he spoke, and an observer could have detected a strong bitterness in his tone.

"Yes—on his side it is very important. The beast is heir to a million or more, and I am the one that brought him the intelligence. I suppose he thinks that without me he can do nothing, for I find him at my heels since he heard of it. Good-night. I will call some time when your father is in. I am sure that he does not understand the real dangers of his position. Few persons know better than I how and what they are."

"You hear him?" put in Uncle Billy, with an air of anxiety. "He knows what Brad Awl are frum ther ground up, and yit he wants ter stick 'round hyer whar like ez not somebody 'll put his chunk out; an' then whar 'll I be? Can't yer tell him ter take his own advice, an' go hisself? Oh, ef his knowledge war wu't shucks he'd start now."

In his anxiety the bummer was advancing toward Ianthe, who naturally drew back more in disgust than alarm. Twenty-four hours had made a visible change for the worse in the judge. His face had a blue white tinge, and his eyes an unaccustomed glare.

Jawler turned upon him in undisguised wrath, and without a word caught him by the throat, pushing him out of the room, and along the hall, until they were fairly beyond ear-shot. Then he set him up against the wall and hissed into his ear:

"If you don't quiet down I want you to understand I'll administer on Ephraim's estate by law of knife, and cut your throat from ear to ear. What do you mean, intruding on that lady, you rum-soaked, drunken old idiot?"

"Oh, ough! Touch me a leetle lightly, pard. I'm gittin' old, an' can't stan' much. An' ain't I a millyunair? When I git Ephy's money can't I go where I want? An' they can't call me a drunk ole idjeot, either. No, boss, that hurts my feelin's. I've swore off, an' frum this time on ther jedge are a sober man."

The gravity with which he spoke seemed to shake Jawler as being highly ridiculous. He gave a short laugh, and his hand dropped away.

"You have sworn off for an hour or two, and it seems like an age. I've had you at my heels for about the same length of time and it appears like a lifetime. If you are wise you will wait my pleasure, or else go off prospecting for Ephy's money on your own hook. I've other work to attend to before I can waste my time on you. If I have to speak again, hanged if I don't cut you altogether."

"Don't say that! I have been patient, an' I won't be no bother; but when a man's all broke up like me, he hain't no time ter waste, an' I can't bear ter lose a holy minnit. No, don't say a word now, I'm goin'; but when ye'r ready ter start you'll find Billy Bender ov Black Dam right behind yer—copperheads an' coal-ile, yes."

In abject submission, the old man slouched away, Sam Jawler standing with his hands in his pockets and a hard smile on his face while the judge made an offing.

While he stood there a single individual came hurriedly out; and Doctor Gordon clasped him by the hand.

"My dear sir, I just escaped from that mob of yelling tigers and got in by the back way. My daughter tells me of the renewed attempt on her liberty; and that you were brave enough and fortunate enough to frustrate it. I never felt really alarmed until now. Brad Awl, sir, is worse than its reputation. I believe, sir, that Colonel Thompson has deceived me, and that there is personal danger, sir, personal danger. What is your opinion?"

"Well, I should remark. It's always an even game, heads or tails, when a man goes out in the evening whether he'll come back head up or feet foremost. I am a comparative stranger here, my acquaintance with the town being only of a few hours' standing, but I should judge that if a man wants to become a fit subject for planting he can't find a better place for temporary vegetation and eventual quiet in all out doors. If you're not in with the gang, the gang will very soon be into you."

"So I believe, so I believe. But which is the gang? And why do they not protect me from these villainous attacks? They can raven around a poor Chinee like wolves; but they leave this villain in the mountains, this Colonel Coldsteel to work his will without lifting a finger. Every time it is an outsider that comes to the rescue; and some man that seems to be particularly objectionable to the older inhabitants. What is your opinion?"

"I think perhaps you're not as big a fool as you look; and that there is some chance for you and your daughter yet. You'll slide out when they ain't looking for it, and give them the grand slip. It's not saying much for the place, but the real rascal they seem to have

such a horror of is a better man than the best man in town. I ought to know a bad gang when I see it—I've hunted enough of them in my time."

"Then," said the doctor, edging up a little closer, and speaking in a lower tone than he had yet employed, "I cannot be wrong in my suspicion. You are a detective and here for a purpose. Is it not so?"

"That's about what you must call it. I don't want to blazon my intentions abroad if I can help it, but incidentally I was looking for old man Bender, while my first object is to find an individual named Walter Burt."

"And who is Walter Burt?"

"A bad man from 'way back; a gambler, a bank-robber, thief, cut-throat; a very devil incarnate if I am to believe the reports of those who set me on the trail. If, when found, they are able to prove a tithe of the crime against him that they promise he will swing higher than Haman."

"And can they? You seem to speak as though there might be some doubt about it."

"It is a serious thing with me to hound a man to the gallows—a thing I have never done without some hesitation. It is not that the law punishes the criminal, but that I have aided the law for money. Pah! the accursed coins seem to burn my fingers when I touch them."

The doctor looked curiously at the detective, as if surprised and interested in his scruples; though his own affairs were too urgent to allow of his long forgetting them. He returned to them with a suddenness that might be meant to take Jawler off his guard.

"As a detective, then, who can read a man at a glance, name your fee, and tell me in confidence what is your opinion of the man with whom you had some little difficulty to-night—Colonel Thompson."

"Of him I will give you an opinion with the bark on, and won't charge you a cent. He is the most thorough-paced villain in Brad Awl, and sooner or later means you harm. It is with the hope of saving you from him that I allow you to know me as I am. I do not think that you will betray my confidence."

"Thanks, thanks; be sure that I will not. But there is a crowd coming this way, and I would rather avoid it. Besides, I must return to my daughter. To-morrow I must see you again. I will then perhaps be ready to take your advice, whatever it may be. Good-night, and say nothing of the adventure with Ianthe if it can be helped. I am anxious to avoid such publicity for her if it can be avoided."

"Good-night, and sleep with one eye open. If you shoot, shoot to kill. The people here can understand that, and respect you for it. I must look around town now. For the future be sure that you can rely on me."

The two separated, Sam Jawler striding away in the direction of the racket alluded to, while the doctor went straight to his rooms.

And he found them tenantless, while pinned to the rude table, by a bowie-knife through its face, was a card, with this inscription written in a fair, running hand:

"Miss Gordon is at last in the hands of Coldsteel and his men, and pursuit will be useless, since twenty thousand dollars will be required as her ransom. When that is paid, she will be returned safe and uninjured."

TRY AGAIN."

CHAPTER XX.

WATCHING IT WORK.

THE lamp stood right over the card so that Doctor Gordon had no trouble to read the notice. His eyes ran over it and for a moment he stood as if spellbound. Then he rushed out through the hall, yelling as he went.

There were probably people in the house but none came to investigate the matter. Every one who had time for amusement had business in another direction; and Gabriel Gordon was fain to seek the crowd. The cause of the renewed excitement remains to be told.

The game at Mad Mike's had not opened at all, since the evening had been fully occupied with the trouble with Jawler, and the excitement at Uncle Johnny's. Miss Bascombe, waiting for her duties to begin, found that her services would probably be dispensed with, and with the curiosity of her sex ventured finally in the direction of the seat of war.

By that time the expedition was well on the way in pursuit of We Waillo, and the main street of Brad Awl was almost deserted. Those who were not out of town were mostly gathered at Uncle Johnny's. Lil had passed over half the distance to the Ark before she saw a man coming toward her.

The sight of the stroller gave her no alarm. The young lady was accustomed to lonely promenades, and had had experience in the use of firearms. Whether this other nocturnal rambler was friend or foe made little difference, for in either case she was ready for him, her hand lying well down in the side pocket of the coat she always donned after nightfall.

The man had sharp eyes however. As Lil was about to pass him he halted.

"Is that you, leetle woman? I've bin a-lookin' fur you."

"Right you are, Joseph. It is I, mine, or me,

done up in a small paper package. What do you want?"

"Nothin' much. I wanted to tell you that everything was plumb on ther bed-rock. Your man were out ter see me—don't know whether you sent him er if he jist caught on. Anyhow I told him that things were squar' betwixt me an' him, an' I wouldn't let on ter Thompson as ter how we'd fixed it. It war good ez a circus ter see how ther kurnel brung him up, an' give me a hint that Brad Awl didn't want any nonsense, an' I wouldn't stand it. I hated ter hev him think I war takin' water; but I'd gi'n you my promise, an' I kept it like a leetle man. What next? If them two pards fall out which side am I ter take? Yer see, I'm lettin' you run things, an' I ain't keerin'. They're both too old ter take your eye so I kin be square ter either."

"Oh, but I object to your putting it in that way. I don't care for either; I just wanted a fair deal without a flyer. I saw into his game and I was bound to burst it. He wanted you to kill off the man and he would rake in all that both left behind. A very shrewd man does Colonel Thompson think himself, but he can't always have things as he wants them."

"Good enough. You want to see him block-ed out, and that's the hand I'll play, every time. I'd just like to know if he set Jim Norris on me, or if he's holding him off. I know the boy is gritty, and if there wasn't something in the wind he would have been after my hair. Instead ov that he's at home, sucking his thumbs. At least, I haven't seen him to-night, and I've been keeping a bright lookout for him. You haven't been speaking to *him* have you?"

"Don't be so suspicious. No, I haven't. I only spoke to the best man—Hush!"

What answer Early Joe would have given was cut short.

Two persons were running toward them, followed at a little distance by a third. They all came from around the rear of the shanty near which the two were standing, and the fugitives, dashing by without ever noticing them, made straight for the cabin of Ante Pete.

"One of them is a woman—it must be the daughter of Gordon," exclaimed Lil, springing up from the crouching position she had assumed.

"An' blast my eyes, ef ther other ain't ther Chinee, es raised all ther racket ter night! How in bald-headed blazes, did he git back hyer, an' what's up now? He's a lunatic sure, er he wants ter stretch hemp. Why don't ther feller behind yelp out? It's ther heathen, he wants, an' one yell would raise ther town."

"What are those two doing together? That is a more important question. I don't suppose you are such a fool as to want to join in the obsequies, so, if you can keep your head cool and your eyes open, you may walk along with me, and find out."

Joe Early was willing to promise almost anything to secure such a privilege, and together they dropped in on the rear of the three.

It was a noiseless chase all around until the two in advance had almost reached the spot for which they were aiming. Then the Chinaman suddenly stumbled and fell headlong, right in the way of his feminine companion, who gave a shrill scream.

The man behind uttered a cry of triumph and was already reaching out his hands when some one sprung out of Ante Pete's.

"Hands up—you! No nonsense or down you go; I've got you lined."

"Why don't the fool shoot?" growled Early Joe. "He can't hold ther drop more ner a minnit in this kind er light. If he holds on till some one loans him a quarter, I'd sooner take ther other feller's chances yit."

The wisdom of the remark was proved more quickly than Early had expected. While Edgewood held his hand, possessed by the fear of a mistaken aim, the man he had really covered acted with a prompt boldness that showed how utterly reckless he was.

With one swing he tore Ianthe from the ground and threw her over his back, twisting her arms around his neck. Clasping her wrists together over his breast with his left hand, he steadied her with his right arm held behind him, and darted away.

"Thunder an' blazes, it's that blower, Ananias Jawler!"

Early Joe had his pistol out as he spoke, and doubtless expected that he would have a chance at close quarters, for he, too, scarcely cared to risk a shot under the circumstances.

But, as Ante Pete leaped forward, Ananias darted to one side and fled with a speed that was surprising. The fact was that the weight of the girl was little, if any, incumbrance to him.

Lil Bascombe had the coolest head of the rest. She gave a glance around, to see what he was aiming at, and saw.

Half a dozen horsemen came tearing up from the vacant ground to the side of the street, and straight toward these ran Jawler—though, all the same, he might be heading for Mike Mulloney's. That idea struck Lil when she saw the foremost of the horsemen bend forward and strike Ananias a stunning blow on the forehead with the butt of a revolver.

As Jawler dropped the man sprung from his horse—which stopped on the instant—and gathered up the girl before Jawler's hold had fairly relaxed.

Tossing Ianthe up to the nearest of the men, who had halted when he did, he whistled to his steed and ran rapidly on toward the shanty, while the rest darted away in yet a fresh direction.

Early Joe was but flesh and blood. He had his revolvers ready, and he wanted to take a hand.

"Wait, wait," whispered Lil. "There is something strange about all this. We can't be certain yet who are her friends. If you open fire you may hit the wrong man. It's a mixed up game. Are those the men that followed the Chinaman out of the camp? And what brought him back?"

With the two points to consider, Joe held his hand and watched.

The leader of the horsemen was aiming for the luckless We Waillo, who had apparently been stunned by his fall, since it took some time for him to raise himself into a sitting posture, which he retained, rubbing his head in a bewildered sort of way, apparently not noticing the rapid approach of the man who was more than likely to prove an enemy as bad as the one from whom he had fled. His hands were still at his face, when he was suddenly seized and flung over the back of the well-trained steed.

Ante Pete had followed Jawler, and when that unfortunate was stricken down he was only a few yards behind. He, too, was either bewildered or deceived by the transfer, and stood staring as the girl was being carried away. He did not notice even if he heard a woman's voice, raised behind him in a shrill scream.

"That gits me!" exclaimed Early Joe, as the horseman, once more in his saddle with We Waillo in front of him, dashed away to join his comrades. "You've had your way, little woman, and it looks ez though you'd made a mess of it. They've got clean off, whoever they be, an' I guess if you keep mum I won't say much about what I've seen. Ez small ez I feel, I don't wonder they didn't see me."

"I can't understand it," said Lil, thoughtfully.

"Neither can I," for the moment dropping the dialect that he had hitherto always assumed when within the limits of Brad Awl, "but I feel as though I'd been played for a fool and lost my last stiver!"

"Suppose we see what Ananias has to say. There is no use to follow on foot, and but little more to give an alarm. Ante Pete will do that for us, while we stand back and take it all in."

There was a coolness about the young lady that was almost suspicious, but Early was too thoroughly committed to her wishes to hesitate now. They advanced toward the prostrate man.

As they reached his side he gave a hollow moan and rolled over. Then followed some almost inarticulate mutterings.

"Did they git her? Yer a boss heathen. Save yerself though; fur ef Brad Awl sees yer yer a dead nigger. Don't shoot, you fool—I'm her friend, cl'ar thro' an' 'way back. Oh, ef Sammy on'y was hyer!"

"Ther man's a durned fool," said Joe, relapsing into current vernacular. "He war tryin' ter call ther turn on a cat-hop, an' got left bad."

"Perhaps," answered Miss Bascombe coldly. "I'd be no good so I'll stay and see what I can twist out of him while you had better follow after that lunatic and see that the alarm is given. This time it looks as though they had gotten clear away with the girl."

"Joseph chips. You've told me ter play my hand an' I'll go ther hull figger. You hear 'em? They've run foul ov a snag; an' it sounds ez though ther b'iler hed b'usted an' she war on fire ter ther guards. So long. I'll see yer later."

In the distance there was a spiteful rattle, and toward it ran Early Joe, his weapons ready.

CHAPTER XXI.

EVERYBODY FOILED.

DERRINGER DECK, with his arms close to his sides ran along on the short line to Malloney's a good deal more rapidly than he knew. As the horsemen were in no great hurry to make their reappearance after their fruitless chase they dawdled along the road, and he actually entered the limits of the camp at one end before they reached them at the other.

As he was by no means certain how much the citizens really knew Bright did not care to be seen until he could find out the drift of public opinion. His first care was to learn whether his actions had compromised Jawler, or his friend Edgewood. He was just flitting noiselessly into camp when he heard the rattle of horses' hoofs.

The first thought was that it was the deputation who had come out after him just returning; but when he saw the dark forms heading directly toward him he had a suspicion that the town had broken out in a new place, and that it would be as well to go slow and see what it meant.

In the bright moonlight it was not impossible to see an object with a great deal of clearness; and he stepped a few paces to one side.

The gang clattered on until nearly opposite to him; and then came to a sudden halt.

"Wait fur ther boss, can't ye?" said the leader, as he raised his hand. "He's got ther cussed Chinee in tow. Ef I'd bin him I'd 'a' cut his throat and left him. He's a heap more bother than good. Why in blazes didn't he hold on to ther gal, an' let me settle with ther heathen?"

Deck Bright took in the position at once, as he saw the one horseman coming up the rear. We Waillo had doubled on them all, and got back into camp in time to be mixed up with these men, who were in a half-hearted sort of way his friends, in a recent attack upon Miss Gordon.

For the Chinaman, after the experiences of the night, he did not care a cent; but he blessed the foolhardiness that had brought him back to Brad Awl, and so caused the delay that left a chance for Miss Gordon.

The straggling row of shanties that marked the main street of the town was not two hundred yards away, and he could hear a noise beyond that showed the citizens to be wide awake. The reckless courage of three men in lingering here with such danger behind might be a sign of other backing not far away; but Bright did not stop to consider that. With a noiseless step he darted forward, and coming from a point toward which no attention was directed he had no trouble in gliding up to the very side of the man who held Ianthe in his arms.

The horse, being more impartial in its attention discovered his presence and gave a snort and a start, but too late to avoid the attack that was coming. With one hand Bright caught the rein, with the other he struck out at the side of the man who was eagerly leaning forward.

It was a solid stroke, that sent a pang of pain with it more confusing than if it had landed fair in the face, and as he twisted to the blow Derringer Deck twitched him from the saddle and sprung into the vacated seat, the form of Ianthe in front of him.

Good horsemanship and perfect courage saved him then. He wrenched the horse around and darted away, shaking the rein out of a hand that snatched for it, at the same time dodging a blow from the opposite side. He was entirely too busy to shoot; and fortunately for him there were reasons why the others held their hands. If there was to be any shooting done it was to be by the leader, though of course Deck Bright was not aware of the arrangement.

"After him, boys; ride him down! He's double weighted, and hasn't a chance."

So the dismounted man cried, without seeming to notice that what he was ordering had already been attempted; but in a moment more he had recovered his coolness, and was able to see that it was not so easy to carry out.

Fortunately, Miss Gordon had fainted, and being fairly balanced, gave no trouble; while Bright, having complete mastery of the animal from the first, and sending it off at its fastest pace, had already gained a start which bid fair to take him right into the streets of Brad Awl long before they could come up with him.

There was racing and chasing, but Deck still held the advantage; and when he turned in his saddle and threw up his hand, he was just in good pistol-range.

At the motion every head ducked down, but when the flash and report followed, the foremost horse gave a great side-spring, showing that the fugitive knew where to place his lead to the best advantage.

The breaking of the ice put a totally different face on matters. In answer, there was a regular fusilade that might have had a fatal effect if every shot had not been fired low. It takes extremely good shooting to hit by moonlight the legs of a running horse. There was really more danger of a miss-shot that should strike higher.

But high above the rattle of fire-arms sounded a shrill whistle, and at the noise pursuit instantly ceased; the men wheeled and quietly galloped back to their dismounted leader, who had given the blast.

Just in time was the movement, since out of the darkness sprung two men, who shot as they came, and ran toward the little squad with a boldness that showed they did not mean to turn back.

"Hyer, Number Two, let me on behind. This cake's all dough. Ther boss hez taken ther short-cut, an' we'll git, too. Git up an' git, ef yer wants ter save our bacon."

There was no longer any show for a fight, and the outlaws were already in full retreat, when Edgewood and Early Joe threw themselves between them and Derringer Deck.

Nor was there any further pursuit.

When the outlaws galloped off in one direction, Ante Pete wheeled and strode back in the other. He had recognized his friend, and the burden that he cared for, and that was enough for him; while Early Joe was perfectly willing that We Waillo should go to his friends and save his neck from being stretched by the men of Brad Awl.

"Saved once more, and this time I had a hand in it, even if it was but a small one. This way! The danger is over for the present."

"And the present seems to be remarkably brief. They almost deserve to succeed with all that pluck. It's a shame to have it run to waste. I've got my hands full if I want to keep up my end; though it does seem as if I was a horse ahead just now."

So remarked Deck Bright, as he allowed his burden to slide into the outstretched arms of his friend when they had reached their shanty.

"An' ther heathen Chinee hes saved his neck ag'in," said Early Joe, who had come with them. "If he don't take ther wink now he's a mighty blind hoss. I reckon I'd better look up ther gal's father, an' then see after Ananias. *He* hed a pile ov chips on ther games somehow, but, from ther way he strung 'em, blamed ef I could see how he bet. You'd better lay 'round an' be ready ef they come back ag'in. They're durned persistent cusses."

"Blast the Chinaman! he's the worst pill in the box. I half believe he's at the bottom of the whole thing. Yes, Doctor Gordon ought to be here; but I think he's coming now. If he ain't, he must be very lonely up at that end of town, for the rest of the population are about to arrive. Keep them out while I see what the young lady has to say for herself. If she hasn't come to by this time, there may be something serious."

"I wanted to look out for Lil, but I suppose she can take care of herself," thought Early, and so without a very perfect idea of just what had occurred, he advanced to meet the crowd, while Derringer Deck slipped into the shanty.

The first men to reach the spot were Colonel Thompson and Gabriel Gordon.

"What's all this racket; say, *you*?" said Thompson rudely, as he came face to face with Early Joe. "That's right, freeze on to him, boys. *He's* had a hand in it, sure. We all heard the threats he made the other night, and if he's been laying low since, it was to get in his work. *You* villain! Where is Doctor Gordon's daughter?"

"Ask Ante Pete, he just carried her inside."

Early Joe replied to the question with perfect nonchalance, even as he made a quick shift, that took him out of reach of the two citizens who made a sudden grasp for him, and brought his back against the building. At the same time his hands dropped on his revolvers.

"Hands up, Joe. This is no fool matter. It may have been you, it may have been some one else, but I could almost swear to your writing. We'll have to take you in until the thing is investigated. We arrest you on suspicion, anyhow."

"I guess not. If that's bin ary crooked work done, an' a trail that looks es though it might p'int my way, I'm standin' still till yer finds whar it comes frum, an' all ther time a-bettin' that yer don't find me at the other end; but I hangs on ter my sixes, an' ef my hands go up they go up with 'em. Don't you furgit it."

"That's good sense in large chunks," laughed Derringer Deck, leaning out from the little window at Early Joe's head, his hands resting carelessly over the sill. "It might be as well to hear what the young lady has to say before you bother with Joe; but if you are in real, right down earnest about doing something to the men that are trying to rake in the ducats that Thompson thinks ought to belong to him, they're right over there—Coldsteel, no doubt, and about five more of the same gang. If you find 'em I've no doubt they'll try to make it pleasant for you. They did their best for me."

The men of Brad Awl looked uneasily over their shoulders; and then back again to Deck Bright, to see Doctor Gordon's face appear beside him, in the window.

"She's here, gentlemen, unharmed, and these men have saved her. Thanks rather than threats are due. If you think it worth while to pursue the outlaws now and I will tell you the full story when she has entirely recovered. I must add that it was through the courage and aid of the Chinaman that her rescue was made possible."

And then into Deck Bright's ear he hissed:

"Confound you! are you going to be forever in the way? Why don't you let them take her?"

CHAPTER XXII.

A GOOD PROSPECT FOR A COLD DAY.

WHILE Colonel Thompson had been wasting his time with Early Joe, the doctor, the moment he heard the first answer, went straight into the cabin, and found his daughter somewhat limp and unstrung, but recovering her senses.

In a few words she told her story.

This time there had been no bungling. Her father had barely left her to look for Jawler when she was seized from behind by some one who must have come from the other room. He carried her out through the rear entrance without meeting any one, and hastened away along the rear of the line of shanties. Probably she would have had no chance at all for escape if the Chinaman had not suddenly popped up on hands and knees, in his path, causing him to lose his burden as he sprawled upon the ground.

Fortunately she was not hurt, and We Wailo, springing to his feet, caught her hand and urged her away in instant flight.

They passed a man who came from the street toward them, probably attracted by their voices, and when he had shouted at them in he joined in behind.

After that she knew little beyond the fact of having a very heavy fall, until she found herself in the arms of Ante Pete—with Derringer Deck and Early Joe, who had evidently come to her assistance, standing near.

Having heard this much, the doctor turned and said a good word for his partner, who was evidently under unmerited suspicion, and then whispered something in Deck Bright's ear that was far from being a blessing. It struck him so hard that he had no answer ready, and he saw the doctor gather up his daughter and lead her off in a state of mild coma that was not broken by the roaring shout that greeted the two as they made their appearance upon the threshold.

There was a show of pursuit made by some of the enthusiastic ones, but it came to nothing. Brad Awl was too wise to follow very far into useless danger, though there were some awful threats made by the escort that accompanied the Gordons.

When all the rest had departed Early Joe was about to go, also, when he heard Bright's voice calling him to come in, and he obeyed without the least hesitation.

"See here, old man," was Deck's salutation, "you're one of the older settlers; if it's a fair question, who owns the Ark?"

"Thompson, ov course. Thar ain't much about Brad Awl that he don't own."

"And what's your opinion about this new partner of yours? Is he in on the ground-floor, or is the gallant colonel playing him for a flat, with a big chance to win? This thing begins to get me, and I'd give a dollar for a fair squint at the African in the wood-pile."

"I can't give it to yer ez squar' on that, but you kin gamble a leetle that ther doctor ain't preazctly a fool. He may be jest a side pard ov ther kunnel, brought in from 'way back ter work roots on ther outsiders, er he may be jest a victim. Don't ax me which ter-night—I'll never tell."

"Anyhow, the gang seems to want to crowd you and me, and I'd like to have a fair idea of where you stand. When everybody else takes a shy at me, I want to know whether you'll be shooting the other way."

"Sorry I can't tell, but I'll give you all I know. Ef ther doctor are on ther squar' with me, I'm backin' his game fur what I'm worth, no matter who she runs ag'in. When he goes back on me, ef you're on ther other side, I'll ketch on. Jest now I stand purty much alone. Look out fur yerself. You've bin puttin' yer finger in a pie, an' it may git hot yit. Good-night."

With a nod to Ante Pete, who had said nothing, and was a little weak after his exertion, Joe left the room. He had said his say squarely enough, but evidently did not care to pursue the subjects broached any further.

"There's the only honest man in Brad Awl," said Bright, and he's acting a lie. I declare I'm quite discouraged. I think I'll stay with you to-night, Pete. After what I've just heard I swear I don't know what to look fer next, and maybe I'd better be around."

Edgewood smiled.

"Wait a little and I'll have some talk with you. I find my wound, trifling as it seems, has taken a good deal of the steel out of me. I'm not worth much in a fight, and hardly in condition for a foot-race. I don't know much about the doctor; but I had a few moments' talk with his daughter, in the early part of the evening, and I thought I was learning a good deal."

"Take your time to it. Things look as though they had quieted down for the night and I can afford to wait."

The two sat smoking for a time, and to judge by their faces the currents of their thoughts were widely different.

Meantime the colonel had left Gabriel Gordon to the company of his daughter, and with half a dozen citizens in his train, had gone back to Malloney's, where he lounged about for half an hour or so.

If any one had watched him narrowly he would have been apt to have an idea that he was waiting for some one. If it was for either of the three men with whom he had had trouble that evening he was doomed to disappointment, for none of them showed up. At length, when the Brad Awl evening had neared its close, and the boys began to drop off, he left the house.

He went toward his own cabin, a solid little building which was kept in order for him by an old mestizo, though he frequently took his meals at the Ark. He did not reach it for a time though, since on the way he quietly stepped into Chet Chenery's.

Chet Chenery was by common report his intimate friend, and had the distinction of being the best dressed man in the camp. His ostensible occupation was looking after some of the colonel's mining ventures; and his real business was draw poker. He had a fair amount of success at it, too; but he had not so invariably won as to have given cause for many invidious remarks.

Colonel Thompson came gliding in, and imme-

diately upon entrance proceeded to lock the door.

There were more present than the two friends, however. Half a dozen others had dropped in, in the same incidental way and were conversing in a low tone. At his appearance they looked up inquiringly.

"Yes, I put up the notice, boys; and I'm here to talk over my game. It seems to need it. How does it strike you, Chet?"

"It strikes me that Satan has come along with the rest; and from the way he acts I wouldn't be surprised if he chipped in on the other side."

"You mean the man that calls himself Jawler?"

"That's him—the monumental liar of the Andes. Thar's a nerve in his talk and a glint in his eye that shows there may be thunder and brimstone behind. What's he here for, any-way, if it ain't for us?"

"I don't know that it makes much difference as long as he don't get away. A man more or less in camp hardly counts in Brad Awl. The only point is that he would have coined a different lie if he had been looking our way."

"But there's truth—a shadow of it—behind the lie. That giant *was* told the yarn about the spectacle man. I wish the tongue had been bitten out before the words were said, since they seem to have brought them all together. But Bright was coming, a little sport *seemed* to have skipped over the range and it looked like a good way of disposing of a man about whom we didn't know much but suspected a good deal."

"Well, it's only one more man," said the colonel; but there was a single gleam of warning in his eye, seen only by Chenery, that caused the latter to change the head of his discourse."

"That's so, but there's two or three more. They all strike the camp about the same time and it looks as though they were going to pool their chips and go fer the bank. Ain't it a bad time to push things with Early Joe? He's no stranger and is solid with lots of the boys. And yet, if he ain't planted he may take a notion to square it with the partner you picked up for him, and cut up rusty before the time for the clean up."

"Bah, Chet, you're not going to show the white feather, are you? What are half a dozen to us? We know who to take in and they don't. And as for Joe—don't be alarmed, Lil of the Ark will hold him steady until we get all ready; and then he may retire."

"But who's to hold Lil steady? I know a little more about her than you imagine! I reckon she pulls the cards about as Mike has stacked them up; but he's not more than half in love with us just now. It pays him big, and we keep off of his toes; but I suspect he'd like to be the the chief in town himself. If you don't tell him straight up and down how the thing is running some day he'll try it on."

"Let him try. He and Early won't pull together—and if we play them against each other it may save some one that can't be quite so well spared."

"Of course. And all that talk is well enough; but there's something important that no one seems to have dropped at yit. Somebody from the outside caught on in our little game to-night and came mighty near getting away with the plunder we set up for ourselves. Our share of the work was done very well until that infernal Chinaman appeared, but who was it that took the contract when our men threw up? That's what I want to know. You don't think it could be the party that Jawler says trussed him up? Is Joe in that?"

With the exception of Chet Chenery and the colonel the men looked at each other in a puzzled sort of way.

"Yer don't mean ter say that's what yer war drivin' at when yer started ter wound Joe Early?" began one.

"No, Bud, I don't. I was only going to give Brad Awl a funeral on general principles, but he was so ready, with his revolvers, and the fellow with the derringers looked like such good backing, that I drew out. I had half a notion to risk a shot; but I saw that if I did I'd get it back with compound interest. I understand that there were half a dozen men on horseback trying for the girl when the man that took her dropped her. Who were they? Six and one makes seven. It may be that it will be to our advantage if a crowd of that size shows its hand around here—if they are of the right stripe. When we send them over the range, there will be fools enough to set us up for regular little angels."

"An' yer think there's another gang?" began Buck Bunker, with a frankness that brought an instant scowl to Colonel Thompson's face.

"Hush, you. Don't talk so plain. Even these walls may have ears. There's a gang, as everybody knows, that has done everything from robbing a sluice to holding up a stage. Broken up elsewhere and supposed to be exterminated, they have found their way to, and terrorized even Brad Awl."

With some impatience Chenery broke in:

"Oh, I'm on Buck's side, to-night. Let's have a little talk. We set up a game to get some of the doctor's coin at the jump off, and at the same time win his everlasting gratitude.

From what you *heard* of him he has a neat little pile, and is crazy-mad to strike a bonanza and be a bigger man than ever Floyd or Mackay was; from what I've *seen* of him he's fool enough. But first one chipped in, and then another; and now it looks as though there was some one else on the same lay. If there is it strikes me that they know all about us, and if our cappers don't open their eyes wide we may run against a snag. My advice is, kill 'em as fast as you find 'em. We don't know who's behind; and we don't want to. Let the girl alone till we clear the field."

"An' s'posin' he takes skeer an' jumps ther game, when he sees ther corpses lyin' round loose?"

"How will he jump?" answered Chenery, looking at the last speaker with a smile. "If Coldsteel wrecks the stage and turns him back without a dime he'll have to draw on his correspondents for more means; and it will be our business to see that he draws large enough."

"Very true, very true," interposed the colonel; "but just now the question with me is, which are the most dangerous men?"

"Oh, take 'em all at once; but if there's any choice, I vote for the Sport in Spectacles. Somehow he's been bad medicine fer me ever since he's been here. It's too late to try it on to-night, but there oughtn't to be much trouble about letting the most of 'em in to-morrow. The town isn't goin' to bump itself very high for strangers, only the next time put a man behind that will shoot. If it hadn't been for the succeeding jamborees the failures to-night would have got you laughed out of camp."

"You've heard the plan all of you, and I think much the same way. After the failure to take in the Spectacle Sport, which I undertook on my own account, I thought it no more than right to have counsel on the matter. Yes or no. Have I authority to go ahead? Let me hear from you all."

One after another, each man there gave answer, and without an exception it was:

"Yes."

"Cold or hot, it's going to be some kind of an unpleasant day for our friend in the spectacles," said Chet Chenery, with one of his unpleasant laughs; and then the business of the conclave was over.

Only the colonel, with his hand 'on Chenery's shoulder, whispered:

"There's one little point. This Jawler is pretty sure he recognizes me, and knows that if he is right I know him from the ground up. He's come here to kill me, but he'll do it above-board and meantime will be as hard to catch as a mountain flea. I'm looking for my chance, and if the boys don't do it for me, I'll drop him myself, and say my say about it afterward."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WE WAILLO'S "YANG SHI BUTTA."

THE reckless way in which We Waillo appropriated the horse that had just done him such good service was enough to show that the foreigner from the flowery land was a little desperado of the purest water. It was done so quickly and so regardless of the danger that it almost won the admiration of Mr. Bright, and it would have done so altogether if he had not been personally a sufferer. There was, however, an appalling amount of ingratitude about it that no doubt was sufficient excuse for his disgust; and the self-control that helped him to refrain from shooting for fear of hurting the animal was something wonderful.

So We Waillo thought, when, after thundering along for a moment or so, in expectation of a bullet singing about his ears, or even hitting the uncertain mark he presented, he drew rein somewhat upon seeing that there was to be no pursuit. Over that road the rate at which he started out was more than dangerous. Once being assured that he was not to be immediately followed, he came to a halt, and after listening awhile, turned the horse loose, starting it off with a stroke on its shoulder. He then deliberately retraced his steps for at least one-half the distance he had ridden.

Standing by the side of the trail, he listened eagerly, and heard, first the distant clatter of hoofs, and then the sound of voices, wafted faintly to him on the night air.

A grin overspread his features as he caught by instinct the state of affairs below him, and making sure that there was no one near to note his actions he struck off almost at right angles, following a course over the difficult ground with wonderful skill.

For fifteen or twenty minutes he went on, getting deeper among the broken rocks and blind gashes, yet never once seeming at fault, until, at length, a faintly-heard sound caused him to halt and throw himself behind a huge, flat boulder.

The sound seemed nearer—it grew plainer.

It came from a direction widely varying from that which he had followed, and he knew it was not likely to be his pursuers from Brad Awl; though soon the clink of horse's hoofs could be distinctly heard.

We Waillo still crouched in the shadow of the rock, the horseman heading directly for the spot; but when he heard the sound of a voice,

though only a word or two was spoken, he half-raised himself up, as though intending to make his presence known.

A second thought restrained him, and he allowed the midnight prowlers to go by, rising up and following after before the last man had gotten a dozen yards in advance.

"It seems to me the heathen must have been pretty well used up if he hasn't come around yet," remarked a careless voice. "You sure he ain't dead? It would be a rough joke to be taking all this trouble with a corpse."

"And it would have been a rougher one to come in without him. No, he's not passed in yet; but he's very dish-raggy. The way he feels I shouldn't wonder if there was a bone or two broke. If he's alive in the morning we'll figure it all out; but I won't be weeping much if he ain't."

"Better take a little keer on him. *Ef* ther kunnel wants him then, *an' ef* he ain't hyer it'll start a ravin' hot cyclone."

"Bet your life he won't want him—except out of the way. He's too fresh to keep around this lay-out; and with what he knows it won't do to let him go peddling his goods about any other. What was that he was trying to get out a piece back? You went very tender about the way you stopped off his wind just then, I thought."

"Thunder, no. He was going to howl when he hadn't ought to, and if I choked too hard I don't see how the boss can blame me. But dry up on the heathen and tip Kiddy the whistle. Next thing you know he'll be pumping lead down among us; and serve us right for not attending to our business. We're past the rock now."

The warning caused an instant halt, while the sound of a low, and peculiarly trilling whistle was heard from their midst, which was immediately answered at a point a short distance ahead in the darkness, by a sound exactly similar.

At that the little party advanced in silence; followed by We Waillo, when they had passed him, flitted along in their rear with ears wide open, and his almond eyes actually bulging as he listened to the conversation, which reached him with sufficient distinctness to give him its full drift, though he was none the less puzzled at what he heard.

He shook his head, peered forward, trying to pierce the darkness, and his lips moved soundlessly as he thought to himself:

"My no sabbe why for he taipau t'inkee so fashion. Suppose him b'leevee one piecee bunder him talkie so fashion blight sun, t'hat be too muchee dangelsome We Waillo boundee—him better skip. Eh, Ch'hoys. See what hap got plisner fo' Chinee, t'hen light cutee allo maskee galow."

We Waillo had come to the conclusion that his stock was below par from something that had been heard in regard to him, and that it would be best for him to vamose the ranch, yet he was more than curious to know what was the mystery of the body that one of the gang carried in front of him; and as he was by no means a coward, he was bent on finding out.

He heard the horsemen pass the sentinel, exchanging some low spoken words as they went by; but he turned aside before reaching the guardian of the pass, and quietly scrambled up what seemed to be a perpendicular wall of stone.

It was not the first time he had followed that path, and he made his way upward without hesitation or mishap until he stood on a rocky plateau some fifty feet or more above the level of the grass he had left beneath; over this he moved with the same reckless confidence until he reached the very brink of a cliff which jutted out over a little amphitheater let into the rock.

Here he stood quiet for a moment, listening eagerly; and then dropped at full length, craning his neck over and striving to pierce the darkness beneath.

A sigh of satisfaction issued from his lips.

He saw the glow of a lantern, and two men appeared, carrying a body between them. They said nothing but went straight ahead, apparently entering the solid rock just under him. After a momentary absence they reappeared and without their burden, and went away in the direction whence they came.

"Hi-yah!" chuckled We Waillo to himself.

"Tinkse must hap drop to We Waillo talkie Kunne T'omson, no sabbe what him littee game but wantchee sendee uppe flume. Allee samee one piecee too mystlelius t'ing. Must makee slide down lope, see what fo' allo play pidgin."

Without much delay he proceeded to put his plan into execution. He had doubtless had an eye on the spot before since he found a lariat secreted near by, attached by one end to a stout stake, around which it was wrapped.

Thrusting the stake into a convenient crevice he dropped the end over the brink, and without hesitation began to lower himself, hand under hand.

When he had gone a few yards he felt around with his foot until it rested against the edge of a shelf of rock, upon which he managed to worm himself.

Dragging up the free end of the rope he crawled back a few yards, until he came to an

opening, down which he cast the cord, and slid rapidly along an almost perpendicular chute; then swinging into what seemed nothingness; and finally striking solid rock with his feet. Apparently he had about reached his destination, for he allowed the rope to drop away from his hand, while he struck a match, with which he lighted an end of a candle produced from one of his capacious pockets.

Then he looked around him; and uttered a cry of surprise.

"Hai-yah! Good joss; dat be We Waillo him yang shi butta, allo way from Chinaside!"

It might be a very natural mistake for We Waillo to make—that it was his younger brother from China. Not three feet away, seated with back to the wall of the cave, and sandaled feet stretched straight out in front, was what at first sight one could have vowed was an exact duplicate. It was no wonder that We Waillo shrunk back in something like affright from this apparition, that glared at him over the muzzle of a leveled revolver.

His dismay only lasted for a moment.

Executing a low salaam, he silently held up his candle and scrutinized his duplicate, a grin gradually overspreading his features.

"How fashion allo this? You belongey smart inside, you foolo 'Melican men. Foolo We Waillo—that no can do. Him look, see willow waist; him look, see kumleen (little feet); him sabby 'Melican glil. W'at wantche? Lobber men no hap love pidgin fo' Chinee, him no hap love pidgin fo' la-li-loong. Eh, ch'hoys."

"What do I want? Of course to get out of this; though I am afraid it will be impossible without more help than you can give me. I might have known that I could not deceive a Celestial though I would pass well enough among those to whom all Chinamen are alike. Folly brought me into this scrape, and as I have given you a chance to see what was in store for you, and so to save myself, I hope I may depend on you to help me."

"Hi-yah! T'at bellee plopla. Ketch on lopee, climb uppee, skip. 'Melican glil allee samee cioclumble."

"Of course I am cool—it is my only chance, and I have brains enough to see it. Unfortunately, I am not able to perform the gymnastics you suggest. If I haven't broken a limb or two, I have very badly sprained them, and if I wasn't afraid of being heard I should really love to shout. No, if I am to be rescued it will have to be by the assistance of some one from the outside. You could hardly carry me away by yourself, and, after all, there is but one person I want to trust. If you could go for him, he will pay you well, and you will have my everlasting friendship. Do you know Mr. Bright, a sporting gentleman in Brad Awl?"

"T'at allee samee Dellinglee Deck. Know him heap way uppee, you bet. You him fli'nd?"

"I hope so, though I am almost afraid to say, after the last few weeks. I know I can depend on him, and I know that if he comes I shall be safe. Will you go?"

We Waillo screwed his mouth up with the most comical expression of disgust at the proposition.

"What was I thinking of? That is so. They were going to hang you there this very evening. You would scarcely dare to venture into the place. Could you in any way find some other messenger?"

The Chinaman shook his head, and remained silent, evidently in a state of thoughtful perplexity, at last saying, slowly:

"Blad Awl no hap use We Waillo to-nightly. Tinkse bettle plan take glil uppe lope maske hidee allo blight sun. Chineeman go down, maske load-agent tinki him got out. Bimby slip out, see Dellinglee Deck, tell him cohom, show way, hap ebley t'ing allo lightee ebley time. Eh, ch'hoys?"

The idea was not a bad one, in one way. If the men did not kill him off-hand, or throw him back into the cell from which he intended to pretend that he had escaped, it would effectually cover her retreat. The question was whether she could stand it to suffer for a day without attention. It seemed possible, and it was at least advisable to take the first step toward retreat.

"Very well, we will try it," she said, after a moment's consideration. "I can be no worse off than if I remain here, and it may be that by to-morrow I will be able to drop this masquerade, and go myself."

CHAPTER XXIV.

IANTHE OBJECTS, AND DECK BRIGHT SECONDS THE MOTION.

THE following day affairs at Brad Awl seemed to be shaping themselves more to the doctor's hand. He and the colonel held a long conference, during which the doctor freely expressed his fear at the persistent attempts made to abduct Ianthe; but with strong perversity he never once hinted at throwing up his chances for a bonanza, or expressed a desire to draw closer to him the men who had done him such good service the night before.

There might have been a reason for that in the fact that it was not hard to see that Colonel Thompson had his prejudices about the strangers, and would not willingly be brought into

friendly relations with them, even though he would say but little about them.

"You'll have to square it with Early Joe for the present," the colonel admitted, "but before long we'll freeze him out, and set you up for a regular chief in camp. The boys are getting used to your style, and I tell you it takes, when it has a show. I wouldn't say anything about it to Miss Gordon, but just to make you feel secure, and to provide against contingencies, I'll pick out a real good, solid, reliable man or two, to act as a sort of body-guard. Once on our guard and there will be no more of this nonsense. You've had a chance to see how it is yourself. Brad Awl is a rough-spoken sort of place, with a good deal of gambling and display of weapons; but we are all slow to shoot. Why, one night in Glory Gulch would make a bigger show of stiffs than a whole month here. If we can keep the foreign element down we are going to have one of the cleanest camps in all out-doors. Even Joe Early wouldn't be a half bad sort of fellow, if he would do more work on his claim, and let cards and whisky alone. It is arranged that we go out and take a close look at things to-day; and if he talks like himself I reckon you'll come back the happiest man in town, to think you've got into such a big thing."

And once started on the subject of the prospective bonanza, the doctor forgot his troubles, and became enthusiastic enough to suit even Colonel Thompson. The body-guard was put on duty, while the two went off to view the property in which Gordon was supposed to have an interest. When, at rather a late hour in the morning, Derringer Deck came strolling up to the Ark, the first person he saw was Jim Norris, lounging about, with the stolid air that generally means something.

It was the first time he had seen him since the night of the fight with Early Joe, and Bright looked at him in a cool, reflective sort of way.

Norris caught the glance in an instant, and his face flushed with anger. At first it looked as though he would resent the attention. It took a powerful effort to enable him to fold his brawny arms across his chest, close his lips tightly, and look another way.

"I thought so," was Bright's silent comment. "He's no coward, and if he's not around on special duty my mother's eldest don't know beans when the hog is untied. I'll bet high that it's for no good, either. In Peter's interest I'll see if I can't put a spoke in his wheel."

He had the chance a good deal sooner than he expected. While he was considering how he had best embroil himself with the man, Miss Gordon came tripping out.

She was daintily dressed, and looked so fresh and smiling that a stranger would never have guessed that within the last fifteen hours she had been in danger of her life or liberty, and had escaped by the merest accident.

In passing she gave a gracious nod to Mr. Bright, and then sailed away down the street.

Derringer Deck nodded in return, but somehow his eyes turned away toward Norris, who still sat as motionless as a statue, only it seemed as though from the corners of his eyes he was watching Miss Gordon.

Bright went on into the house in an unconcerned, lazy sort of way; and the moment he had disappeared Jim Norris, casting a quick glance around him, raised to his feet and strolled off in the direction Ianthe had taken. As Bright had passed straight through the Ark, and came out on the street in a moment, he had little difficulty in getting within reasonable range without much exertion. The result was that the three were sauntering along in a line, at intervals of a hundred yards or so, and Ianthe, without any apparent object, was bending her steps toward the spot at which Laughing Lil and Joe Early had met.

She was not as unobservant as she seemed, since she almost imperceptibly slackened her pace, so that when she halted suddenly and wheeled about Norris was too close to retreat. He made the blunder of first stopping, and then advancing. The result was that he found himself face to face with Miss Gordon, who, by a side step planted herself squarely in his path.

"A moment if you please," she said, lifting her hand, and shaking at him a neatly gloved forefinger.

"This is the second time I have found myself in your way, to-day. The first I supposed it might be a coincidence; I can believe that no longer. If it happens again I shall take measures to relieve Brad Awl and myself of you permanently."

"Beg yer pardon, miss, but sence you've dropped ter ther leetle game it's no more ner right you she'd hear ther hull story. I am keepin' an eye on yer; but it war an arrangement ov yer father an' ther boss. Ther's bin a dead set made ag'in' yer, an' this hyer camp won't rest easy ontel it finds out ef any one hyer hes a hand in it. You needn't be mindin' me, miss. Go right straight ahead, an' next time I'll try ter keep a leetle more outer sight."

"There must be no next time. I am abundantly able to choose my own escorts; and if I prefer to go alone, you nor any one else shall debar me of the right."

"Oh, see hyer, I don't want ter be prowlin'

'round after sich a high-toned piece ov calico. I on'y caught on 'cos ther boss se'd so, an' it 'pears ter me that after ther mess yer hev made goin' it alone yer ort ter be dog-goned glad ter hev a gentleman ter see yer through ther rifles."

"Stop! Enough of that! You have been warned; now stand aside and allow me to pass. I shall not repeat my caution."

Norris was in no angelic humor, either over the task imposed upon him or the way his attentions had been received. He did not move, but stood staring at the plucky little lady with an angry gleam in his eyes. No doubt he intended to give her a caution from his side of the house, and it was for that reason that he raised his big, horny hand, that looked heavy enough to crush the skull of an ox.

The next thing he knew his knees suddenly gave away, at what seemed to be no more than a gentle touch, while, as he stumbled Derringer Deck caught him by the collar, and with one powerful heave flung him out of the road.

Then the little sport stepped to one side and raised his hat:

"There's a basis of solid sense in what he said, miss; but at the same time he oughtn't to be so emphatic. Don't wait for him, if you please. I will probably have to argue the matter with him when he gets up; and the party that gets convinced may not be so pleasant to look at after the discussion is over. No thanks. I want to find out who's running this town, and I guess Jim Norris knows as much about it as anybody."

"As you wish. Only, I have something to say to you when you are more at leisure. Good-morning."

She was every whit as cool as he was, and went back to the Ark without once looking behind her to see what might be the outcome of her effort to set Norris straight.

"A woman of sense," was Bright's comment, as she vanished; and he put up his hands to meet a savage rush on the part of the wrathful Norris. "Now, James, don't crowd the mourners. If I had been certain of your good intentions I wouldn't have chipped in; but I've an idea that you're bad medicine. How's that?"

For a moment after his downfall Norris had lain stretched at full length, glaring up at his adversary, who seemed to be oblivious of his presence. When he sprung to his feet and hurled himself upon Bright he found that gentleman very much alive, and about as industrious as he could have ever dreamed. His gripe failed to connect, and as Derringer Deck shifted around to let his rush go past he sent in a brace of hot ones, the left on the short ribs and the right just below the temple. If the second blow had gone an inch higher up it would have been likely to have ended the discussion there and then. As it was it caught Norris as he was trying to turn, and sent him staggering back.

The instant he had steadied himself his hands dropped upon his revolvers; but sharp and clear rung out Derringer Deck's tones:

"None of that! Hands out and fingers empty or you're my meat, and dead at that. You hit like a house afire; but you can't fight worth a cent. See?"

He did see—the muzzles of the derringers that had appeared as if by magic; and mad or not he was not the man to face certain death if there was a way around it."

"Empty they be sonny, fur yer hez ther drop; but my turn'll come, an' you bet I'll go ter git even. What yer goin' ter do about it?"

He folded his brawny arms, and bit his lip till the blood began to show along the line of his beard.

"Nothing further, at present, old man, except to give you fair warning that when that young lady makes tracks in one direction you want to have your toes pointing in just the other. If you don't attend to it they'll be pointing for the daisies before many more suns roll over your head. You can go now; and I would hint that when you get out of range of my derringers I've a longer gun that is good for a bigger distance. By-by. I'll see you later."

"You bet you will—when there's an even show. An' ef Brad Awl ain't looken at yer stiff shortly after it'll be because it's a-squintin' at mine. I didn't hanker arter this job, but now I'm in I'll stay ef it takes me clean to ther hub."

"So long," responded Deck, cheerily and watched the departing Norris with a gaze more curious than anxious.

CHAPTER XXV.

JIM NORRIS COMES TO GET EVEN.

"I've made a good, solid enemy of him," remuttered Derringer Deck, as he watched the baffled man stride away. "I can look out for a shot from behind; and it will come mighty handy to have eyes in the back of my head when he's around."

"Copperheads an' coal ile, yes!" chimed in a voice that was not entirely unfamiliar. Unconsciously he had spoken his thoughts aloud, and his words had fallen upon the ears of an unobserved listener. Judge Bender had been taking a siesta by the roadside, and now came shambling forward. With bear eyes, hanging lip,

and shaking hands he was rather an unpleasant object to contemplate.

"Hello! Where did you come from? Strikes me I ought to punch your head for having ears where they ain't wanted. Drunk as usual, I see; not too far gone to take in anything you can make a drink or a dime out of."

"Not drunk—Elijer fishbites, no! I've swore off. Pore leetle Ephy's dead, an' me an' Mister Jawler be goin' back ter gether up his coins. But we ain't goin' back drunk; an' ez I war purty full when I swore off, an' didn't get much rest last night, I jest sherried out hyar ter try ter sleep some on it off. Then I heered the chin music atwix him an' you, an' seen ther way yer planted on him. It war jist noble. So it put me in mind ov suthin' I heered las' night, an' I guess Sammy won't mind ef I tell."

"Out with it, in a hurry then. I don't care to linger."

"Wal, yer see, Jawler he kinder throwed off cir me, an' it seemed ez tho' all the liker I ever drinked war beginnin' ter heave up frum my boots. I wanted ter go 'way somewhar. I didn't think I c'u'd stagger very fur so I didn't try, but slopped down right whar ther notion tuk me, which happened ter be ag'in' the side ov Chet Chenery's shanty. I war holding my eyes tight shut, a tryin' ter see what war under my nose so ez I c'u'd get ter sleep when I heered the murmur ov v'ices. Then I got wide-awake ner ever. Thar's nothin' mean erbout me; but I listened—I'll swar I did—an' I heered 'em talkin' 'bout Jawler, an' you, an' ther gal what's jest gone off ahead ov Jim Norris; an' it made me blud creep, so it jest did, copperheads an' coal ile, yes."

"It did, did it? I guess you felt the snakes begin to wiggle a little harder. Eh?"

"It ain't no laffin' matter. There's a gang, an' they allowed they had it in fur you an' Jawler, an' that side pard ov your, Ante Pete. One ov 'em voted ter begin with you, an' so, ter night, ther' goin' ter lay fur you, an' ef they git ther chance they'll call loud on ther hull lot. Hev yer seen Mr. Jawler ter-day?"

Bright looked the bummer over from head to foot, and then slowly extended his hand.

"Here, old man, take this and get a drink and don't be telling any more yarns. That's what you're after and you need it bad. About another hour of total abstinence and you'll be howling with jim-jams."

"I'll hev ter howl then. Much obleeged all ther same, but I can't take no coin fur drinks. I've swore off, an' Mr. Jawler's goin' ter see me through fur expenses."

"He means it," thought Derringer Deck, and if he's not raving crazy there may be something in what he says. If he was propped against Chet Chenery's castle that elegant egg must have a finger ready for the pie. And if he's in it we can look out for his bosom friend; which is the way I've been squinting all along. With such a flourish of trumpets this time they must mean it for good."

"An' ef yer kin find Mr. Jawler will yer please tell him I'm a-lookin' fur him, an' not ter git inter no trouble ef he kin help it. Ter lose him w'u'd break me all up."

The anxious whine of Mr. Bender brought a smile to the face of Derringer Deck, though he answered more kindly than before:

"All right, old man, I'll look out for him; but you'd better taper down by degrees. At your time of life its risky shutting off the steam too suddenly."

"Don't worry 'bout Judge Bender ov Black Dam; he'll pull through, ef on'y Mister Jawler don't go back on him. You don't think he'd do that, now; do you?"

"Oh, no. He's square as a die. I've no doubt he came here expressly to hunt you up, and you'll both make lots of coin. I'm yours for the information, and if you reconsider your resolution let me know and I'll set 'em up; though, if you can hold out, of course it will be all the better."

"I'll hole out, copperheads an' coal ile, yes. I've swored off till Ephy's 'state's settled up. Arter that I ca'n't say what'll happen."

The bummer executed a wink of so prolonged a nature that under cover of its shadow Deck Bright slipped quietly away. He had no desire to listen to the old man's maunding, nor was it that he wanted to coax him on the tear that he had offered to stand treat, but for a confirmed drinker like Billy to stop so suddenly, after a more than ordinarily heavy bout, was almost insuring an attack of *mania a potu*, and the old man did not look as though he had the constitution to stand it.

Keeping a wary lookout for Jim Norris, Bright returned to the Ark, and smiled grimly to see that the body-guard had either been relieved or had relieved himself from duty. For the rest of the day he saw nothing more of him.

Late in the afternoon Doctor Gordon came in. He met Derringer Deck frankly, acknowledged his services once more, and seemed disposed to talk, and very hopefully too, of the future of Brad Awl and his connection with Early Joe.

"He's not near so bad a man as you wanted to make him out," remarked the doctor. "At first I was inclined to take your view; but I found it was doing him injustice, sir, rank injustice, and I told him so. Brad Awl is not as

bad as its reputation, as I find by mixing more with its people. To-night we will make arrangements about getting a force to work, and you will see, sir, that things will begin to spin. I shall crowd the colonel very close before many weeks are over, when I bring in some of my capital and begin to develop."

"Ahem! There will be developments about that time, I have no doubt; but I think it would be more profitable if you'd go back to Glory Gulch with Ante Pete and me, and spend the time playing draw bluff. Around here, the more money you put down, the less you take up. Have your own way though, and if you've no objections, I'll call around to-night and see how that conference gets along. It will be held at Mike Maloney's, of course?"

Gabriel Gordon did not seem to think this farrago needed any answer and so only nodded in a general sort of way; and Bright went to confer with his friend, who had seemed very little the worse from the wound which for a day or so he had been nursing. As for the Jawlers, they were nowhere to be seen.

That evening Mad Mike appeared to be in his most saturnine of humors.

His place had lately been the head-center of attraction, but there had been a failure of profits that he chose to think too provoking to be borne. The excitement about Uncle Johnny's had swept away the crowd just as it was most inclined to patronize the bar, while his game had hardly paid running expenses. Perhaps he anticipated trouble; and even when a fair little crowd of bettors surrounded the table and the dealer began raking in the coin at a rate that showed luck was with the bank, he kept a close watch on all the comers and goers, and had nothing to say.

Things had been running for some hours before Derringer Deck made his appearance, accompanied by Ante Pete.

He came sauntering in, his spectacles over his nose and his hands in his pockets, and looked around with an innocent air that certainly gave no evidence that he knew of the conference of the night before, or suspected any danger. He glanced at the men at the table, and then at the others scattered around the room. There was no sign of Jim Norris. The only one there that he suspected of belonging to the gang was Chet Chenery. The genteel gambler was lounging in a seat near to the faro-table, in a listless sort of way watching Lil pull the cards. He looked up carelessly, and his eyes met those of Bright with perfect innocence. If he had any sinister designs, he kept them carefully to himself.

After a little he arose, yawning, and strolled toward the bar.

"A little of your mildest benzine, Mike. I'll take a nightcap and go to bed. Brad Awl is getting worse and worse. If you don't import some short-card players I swear I believe I'll jump the camp. What's the use of hanging 'round a played-out town, where you haven't a chance for expenses? There isn't a man here with nerve enough to put up a dollar on an ace full. Bob! I'm sick of it."

He tossed down his whisky as he spoke, and then looked straight at Ante Pete, with a glance that seemed to say:

"If you're as good as your name why don't you take me up?"

"It's coming," flashed through Deck Bright. "Go fer Ante and catch me. All right. I'll give you all you want, and keep an eye out for the rest of the gang."

Then aloud:

"I don't know as I'll be more than half fun in the hands of a chief like Chet Chenery; but I always had an idea that I knew the value of ace high as well as any other man, and if you say so we'll try it right on. When I slip up on my figures I'm willing to pay the man that proves it, as far as my pile will go."

"Now you talk. That's the music I've been waiting to hear for a week. Why didn't you come my way long ago, without wasting time over chumps that have to call for a sight for their money on the second hand? Here's the place to get your gruel. Mike, toss us a drink and you'll see draw fer what it's worth."

It was a duel in which the challenger asked for choice of not only weapons but of ground, yet Deck Bright offered no demur, dropping carelessly into the seat that was left him, though the act brought his back to the door.

"If you want it with the bark on, quick and lively, I'm your man," laughed Derringer Deck, as he placed a wallet that seemed to be well filled at his left hand, and flanked it on either side with a reputable-looking buckskin bag. "I'm tolerably well heeled fer a tussle with the man that invented pasteboards, and I'll lay big money that it's my night on. Cut fer deal."

The game was of interest to every lounger—and to some that were not loungers. Laughing Lil, who held the box at the table, glanced up from her work with what might have been taken for a wistful look, as all but the players left her vicinity and took stations near to Chenery and his antagonist.

Bright won the deal, gave a short laugh at his good fortune, and shuffling the cards with the careless grace of an adept, the game began.

A few hands in which little was made or lost.

Then Derringer Deck threw a hundred dollars on the board.

"Blind," he said tersely.

"Straddle," responded Chet Chenery, counting out two hundred as deftly.

"Money talks," said Bright, a moment later, with five hundred on the table in front of him, and a hum of delight went up from the spectators at the evidence that the contestants were going down to business.

One raise after another was made, until suddenly, without any preliminary hesitation, Chenery threw down two hundred, exclaiming:

"Call?"

"Kings," answered Bright.

"Not good."

"Four of 'em, and—"

He ceased speaking, glared up an instant into vacancy, and then, throwing his right hand up over his shoulder, fired a backward shot just as Jim Norris came rushing through the door.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MULLONEY'S MADNESS.

THERE was no doubt in the mind of Derringer Deck when he fired about the intentions of Jim Norris, for he was coming with his revolver out, ready to take the drop.

And it looked hardly like a chance that the spectators had left a clear lane to the door. Whatever was their purpose in it the act had served his own ends for with his foot scarcely over the threshold, Norris threw up his hands and went crashing to the floor.

At the moment Bright's hand went up Chenery had leaned forward as if about to make a quick grasp at the money on the board, but he leaned against the cold muzzle of a pistol barrel.

"No, you don't, Mr. Buckley," laughed Ante Pete, as cool as an iceberg.

"I'm looking out for him. Four kings and an ace beat your bob-tail flush out of sight. If you try to raise that queen or touch that pot I'll blow you cold. There's no sleepers on this board."

While he spoke Derringer Deck, by a hasty movement, swept the stakes off of the table and springing to his feet he faced the crowd, his revolvers out, and Ante Pete at his side—the two men against the town.

"Hold hard there!" he shouted, as he saw the hands of a dozen at their weapons. "The man that draws drops, and I'll shoot to kill. They don't call me the Man with the Drop for nothing, further west."

"It's cold-blooded murder!" exclaimed Chet Chenery, still under cover of Ante Pete's pistol. "There's the corpse of Jim Norris on the floor, and if we don't string him up it will be because there is no law in Brad Awl."

"Law!"

Deck Bright laughed outright.

"I'm the law; and I haven't done more than half-justice, either. Listen, you! There are some among you that are perhaps as square as the rest are crooked. Jim Norris is no more dead than you are, and it's the second time today that I've had to lay him out. I knocked him endways for insulting a lady; and this evening he had his shooter in his hand—there it lies—all ready to get even. If that had been all I'd have given him a bigger show for his white alley; but last night there were half a dozen men of Brad Awl met together and agreed to send me over the range. Jim Norris only took the big end of the contract; now I'm waiting for his pards to chip in. Chet Chenery, do you know who was in the gang?"

"It's an infernal lie, from top to bottom. You've killed him, and robbed me; and now you wanta circus with the camp. A circus you shall have before you get through with us. Down with him, boys!"

The boys were slow about downing. The, to them, mysterious way in which the stranger sport had shot a man behind him made them pause, while no man could tell but what the keen eyes, behind the spectacles were staring straight at him. One and all looked at Mike Mulloney; who still stood behind his bar, with his arms crossed on his breast, looking on with the utmost unconcern.

While they hesitated Norris gave a groan, and turned slowly over.

"Didn't I tell you so?" asked Bright, pointing with his revolver. "I've creased more than one man before to-night, and I wouldn't take even him off without fair warning. If he and the crowd that were going to begin with the Sport in Spectacles want to commence the frolic I'm here, waiting on them."

"Mike Mulloney, are you going to stand this?" interposed Chenery, appealing to Mad Mike. "You always said a man got a show in here, win or lose; but what show have I got? They've got my money, and here's his side pard with a pistol in my ear. Give me an even start and I'll fight this blower for all I'm worth, with fists, knives or guns; but I can't move without sure death, and the boys darn't stir fer fear of giving me a send-off down the grade. Can't you have 'em set up for a new deal?"

"Yes, and him with the drop. That's about his idea of fair play. Mulloney, it's your ranch, and I ain't afraid to trust you to do what's

square. There's my hand and it takes the money. If you don't believe it count the deck. And as for the gang—I'll take them one at a time or all together. But till I know what's in the box I don't throw away the advantages I've got in the game."

"Sure, an' its roight yez are in that same. I wur watchin' av it, an' yer foour kings take the pot; kape it an' welcome; Chet Chenery's not the mon ter draw could oirn when he's lost a shtake. I'll shpake fur him. Ez fur Jim Norris, let him foight his own battles. I reckon Mister Bright ain't ther mon ter roon away."

"That's straight as a string," said Ante Pete, quietly withdrawing his revolver, and turning to his friend, as though he considered Chet Chenery no longer required any attention.

The gambler had his own notions, however; for scarcely had the weapon moved from his head when he sprung to his feet and his hands dove down into his side pockets, his face convulsed with rage and his eyes gleaming with a deadly light.

Neither Bright nor his pard paid the least attention to the danger behind them—even at the noise of the two sharp clicks they did not turn. Another flash of time and he would have worked his wicked will.

"Ah, wad yez?" shouted Mulloney. "Take that!"

He was a man that never had to think twice. The instant he saw the movement of Chenery he seized a tumbler and launched it straight at his head.

The glass caught the gambler well up on the face, and stretched him out as effectually as a pistol-bullet would have done. As his hands flew out of his pockets his derringers came with them.

"Now, paddle yer own canoes," said Mulloney as once more he folded his arms. "Ther keerds waz in moi loine; but the rest ain't, an' Oi'll kape me hand out. Me bank is closed, an' ther place are open fur biz."

It had happened that just at the time when Derringer Deck fired, the deal had run out. At a sign from Mulloney checks and lay-cut disappeared, and Miss Bascombe vanished from sight. Now, from Mad Mike's words it was plain that he offered his place for a battle-ground—though he had not squarely stated that he would not take a hand in himself if a racket was started.

"What is the meaning of all this nonsense? If there has been a man killed in cold blood why don't you take the murderer? We have justice in Brad Awl, and the whole camp backs it!"

The voice of Colonel Thompson rung out suddenly from the door; and every eye shot in that direction.

And then, for answer there was a roar of firearms.

For once taken a little off his guard Deck Bright's eyes had gone with the rest, and from the crowd some one had taken a snap-shot that sent him reeling back, even while Ante Pete's revolvers opened in response to a regular volley that followed the first shot.

"Let them down easy as you can!"

Derringer Deck was not even off his feet, and with extended hands he pumped lead into the whirling smoke, even as he spoke, giving one chance shot at the now hidden spot where he believed Colonel Thompson to be.

A cry followed that effort, and then the voice of Doctor Gordon:

"Help me, Thompson, I believe I'm shot."

"Thunder and Mars!" shouted Bright, aghast at the words. "I've hit the wrong man!"

The disadvantage of being too cool was working them harm; for recognizing the full extent of the mishap at a time when others would have neither noticed nor cared, Edgewood sprung into the crowd regardless of everything, while his friend's muzzles wavered and his fingers refused to pull triggers.

If Bright had followed in the charge the two might have broken through; but while he hesitated a pair of steel arms linked themselves around his elbows and Chet Chenery hissed into his ear:

"Give it up, blank you, we've got you where we want you; and by the fiends you'll swing! Down with him, boys!"

Shaken though he was, and just returning from a state of semi-insensibility, Chet Chenery was, in any way, no mean antagonist. Holding Bright at such a tremendous disadvantage he seemed to have all the odds in his own hands.

That was the way it looked for a moment. Then some way Derringer Deck had seized him by the knees and with a powerful heave had thrown him backward to the floor, falling upon him with a force that knocked the breath completely out of his body.

The arms of steel unclosed and Bright bounded to his feet, but just in time to receive a crushing hit that stretched him alongside of the man he had put out of the game.

A dozen hands were stretched out to grasp him.

"Toi him up; sure an' it's an illegant pace av hemp-stretchin' we'll be afther havin' in ther mournin'."

With the same cool unconcern that he had all along manifested, Mulloney tossed a piece of rope over the bar, into the midst of the strug-

gling throng; and though for a little their anxiety impeded their efforts, the first part of the advice was too good not to be acted on. The worse for wear, but not at all seriously injured, Derringer Deck found himself so tightly trussed up that he could not move a limb.

As those around him fell back a little, to get a clearer view of their captive, a howl arose from the door. Ante Pete's escape had become a fixed fact.

"Never mind; we'll have the villain yet!" cried Colonel Thompson. "Half a dozen good men are after him; and we've got the worst pill in the box, anyhow."

"Yes, an' there'll be no foolishness about him, either. Get another rope an' yank him out! Hooray!"

The proposition suited the crowd exactly, and with a yell it surged forward to put it into effect. There was no mercy and no delay. The work would have been finished at flaming speed if there had not come an interruption from a quarter whence least expected. Mike Mulloney was suddenly galvanized into earnestness.

"Howld on thar! Didn't yez hear me say we'd hang him in ther moornin'? Drap it, er by ther livin' powers it's Mike Mulloney yez will have in yer hair."

"Go slow, Michael," answered the colonel, stepping coolly to the front. "In ordinary affairs you generally succeed in bossing your own outfit, but this thing has got a little beyond you. If you had struck in before all this waste of brimstone and saltpeter you might have saved several valuable lives, and had things your own way. Now it's too late. The whole camp says he shall swing now, and now he shall swing. If you know what is good for you and your shebang, you'll back water and let Brad Awl run its own meat-wagon. Ain't I right, boys?"

The affirmative chorus that rose in answer nearly lifted the roof, and the colonel turned away, as though that settled the question.

And then it was that Mike Mulloney showed to the fullest the trait that had given him the *sobriquet* of Mad Mike.

With a snarling yell he sprung over the bar, and hurled himself into the midst of the crowd.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DERRINGER DECK FINDS A "FLIN' — 'WAY UPPEE."

THERE were half-a-dozen men down already, and each one had his friend or two looking after him; for, by what seemed a strange chance, there was not, in spite of what had been said, a single person killed outright by the shots of Bright and his pard. The balance of the crowd had gathered around the prisoner, and toward its heart leaped Mulloney.

Those that saw him come instinctively leaped back. From a look of careless unconcern the expression on his face turned to one of Satanic rage, his eyes glared, and his hair rose on his head until it resembled that of a ravening wild beast.

And yet after that first snarl not a sound passed his lips, as shaking himself well together he struck out, left and right, right and left, rapid as lightning, heavy as a trip-hammer. At every blow a man went down.

He hit to hurt, too, his whole weight going along with every stroke, in spite of the little room he had—as a Westerner would say—according to his size; and in the very closeness lay his safety, for it was no easy matter to concentrate on him the fire of the revolvers that were hampered by the heads and shoulders of intervening friends.

The room had been a Babel, it became a pandemonium, and what the end might have been was hard to predict, when there came a sudden interruption. Once, twice, thrice a pistol spoke, each shot followed by a crash. Then there was a louder smash, and the room was enveloped in total darkness.

Every light was out; but still Mad Mike struck and tore, and heaped up the men of Brad Awl who had chosen to dare him to the contest. It was only when his blows no longer struck a mark, but wasted themselves in nothingness, that he paused for a moment, keenly listening to catch the breathing of the nearest of his antagonists.

Then the voice of Chet Chenery cut through the utter blackness.

"Look out there! the infernal whelp has rolled away, and if you don't tie up on this he'll give us the slip. Hold on, Mike! We beg! Run the town if you want to; but give us a squar' show in the morning. The hound will be off with my boodle."

"D'yez hear that, yez murtherin' spalpeens? Chet Chenery's ther b'ye wid good sinse. D'yez all beg—every mother's son av ye?"

"Yes, yes. Have it your own way, Mike, so that you show us fair play in the morning."

"An' whin waz ther day Mike Mulloney wasn't doin' thet same? Fur a cint Oi'd sack ther city. Sp'ake up, wan an' all. Does Chet Chenery sp'ake fur yez?"

A chorus of voices was raised in eager assent, for there was a warning in his tone that if not promptly answered he would begin again.

"All roight thin. Oi'm on ther foight ter-night, bigger ner a wolf, but I don't want ter harum me fri'nds, ef they pay fur ther lamps. We'll stroike a light an' put ther jintleman in ther loft up-stairs. Whin anything happens at Mike Mulloney's it must be squar' an' abovee booard. If not, me reputashun's gone."

Outside of his own ranch Mike Mulloney never set up for a chief; and at home he was for the most part the quietest man in town; but things had to run to his rule or there would be war at the drop of a hat. He allowed no shoulder-hitting while his bank was open; and a mob had been cleaned out more than once. It was the utterly reckless way he had thrown himself into more than one crowd that had gained for him the *sobriquet* of Mad Mike; and he had just given a specimen of how he could work when the fit was on him.

Now his wrath was down as quickly as it had risen. At his permission a match was quickly struck, and an extra lamp brought out from under the bar, and lighted.

Then again a howl arose.

Some one had shot the lights out—that was understood—but the supposition was that it had been done to give a chance to patch up a truce. Now it seemed that there must have been an object beyond that, for Derringer Deck had disappeared; while on the floor lay the cords that had bound him, evidently cut away with a sharp knife. Who had done the work?

Chet Chenery, with a cocked revolver in his hand, was the first one to make the discovery, and his face was white with wrath, though not a word passed his lips as he glared around, and then rushed out, followed by a dozen or more. Noise could not recapture the fugitive, and a word or two might bring an explosion from Mulloney which would destroy the last hope. With him Chenery did not intend to settle for the present.

But inside or out there was no trace to be found, and Brad Awl, after ramping around for a little, went back to take stock of the damage, and found that though it was spread around pretty extensively, it had been done with a skill or a chance that was marvelous. Not a man was mortally wounded, though there were a good many that were badly hurt. The great question was, what should be done next.

"Look around at the Ark, and search the camp, though I don't suppose it will do much good. If we can get squarely on his trail we can follow him up, but there's no use to rave around in the dark. One thing is pretty sure—this camp is rid of him for good."

Colonel Thompson took the lead very coolly in giving directions for the pursuit, but his opinion was not received exactly as gospel.

"Sure, an' fur phat w'u'd he be afther l'avin'?" responded Mulloney, with a grin. The little knock-down had put him in the best of humors. "No wan is kilt, an' b'atin' Chet Chenery at draw is no hangin' matter. Ef yez give me ther long odds Oi'll bate yez a leetle he'll be 'round in ther moornin'. An' ez fur his fri'nd, he's a bully b'ye wid a glass oye; an' he'll be 'round, too. Patch on yer plasters ef yer want ter be riddy fur them."

"Curse them; what I want to get at is, who is the traitor in the camp? Who helped them to get away?"

"Don't askh me; I wor too bizzy ter notice," retorted Mike, and it was only by an effort that Colonel Thompson smothered down the response that might have reopened the war.

Who had helped him? for certain it was that when Mike Mulloney made his mad dash Derringer Deck was beyond helping himself. Who shot the lights out; and who cut the ropes that he could never have broken? The shooter was a master of his art; and the other was a man of infinite nerve.

The first question Bright himself could not have answered; the solution of the second conundrum brought a surprise.

When the rope that held the hanging lamp had been severed, and the other lamps were extinguished he gave a sudden vigorous twist, not to escape but to throw himself out of immediate danger. What was his surprise to feel himself seized, and held for a moment until the ropes dropped from wrists and ankles.

Then a voice whispered in his ear:

"Dellinglee Deck come outee heapsee top-side gallow, follow We Waillo. Hap pidgin with him fli'n'. Heap big thing on ice. 'Way uppee."

Deck Bright's first impulse on finding himself free was to go for Brad Awl. If it had not been for certain old beliefs of which he had not entirely rid himself he would probably have done so, and to his own undoing; on second thought he decided that the town could wait until a more convenient season, and he suffered himself to be drawn away by the Chinaman, whose voice he immediately recognized, though he did not remember to have seen him about, during the preliminary skirmishing.

Yet We Waillo had been there, at least a good part of the time, though in a garb so Americanized that he had avoided notice when the attention of every one was turned in another direction. At another time he might not have escaped detection, but just then it was Derringer Deck and Chet Chenery that were the centers

of attraction; and certainly no one supposed that the Celestial would dare to venture back after the narrow escape of the preceding night.

We Waillo could dare a good deal, however, when it was a question of gratitude, and it happened that, though his courage was tried to the utmost he was around just at the moment when his assistance was most urgently needed. No doubt he saved the life of the man who had done the same good turn for him the night before.

At any rate the two slipped away without being seen, and with heels pointing toward Mike's and their feet twinkling over the ground, they did not halt until they had left the noise and the shouting well behind them.

Then Derringer Deck turned to his rescuer:

"Well, Chinee, I did allow to take your scalp the next time we met; but it strikes me you've made things about even. It's a blessed thing I didn't try a final shot on you last evening; I think I could have made it; but where in thunder would I have been now? Shake. I'll allow there's some good in a heathen after all. How in the name of wonder did you come to be around, just when wanted? You've got the nerve of a meat-ax. It was bad enough to come back last night after the rope had broken once; but to-night—it was pure grit, and nothing else."

We Waillo took the extended hand without the least hesitation.

"We Waillo bellee ploud to do him so; but Dellinglee Deck bla'k uppee long tlee. Him no cohom back las' nightee. T'hat otlee We Waillo. T'hat 'Melican glil dless uppee allee samee come from China side, but her allee lookse pidgin. Him fu'st t'inksee him yang shi butta, but that foolee no him long. Gil h'ut, no kin git way, say We Waillo bling Dellinglee Deck him maskee too lightee. We Waillo say him f'lin' way uppee t'hen him loundee ebley time."

"Stop!"

At first Bright was too much astonished to say more. He caught the Chinaman by the arm and gazed earnestly into his face.

"Yes, you're the sure enough article; the heathen I was fool enough to see through the rifle up at Uncle Johnny's. Now, what do you mean by the rigmarole you have been telling me? Was it *another* We Waillo that chipped in to the aid of Miss Gordon—*another* We Waillo that was carried off by the outlaws who had missed their mark?"

"Now him shout, ebley time. T'hat's one piecee stoly belley tue, on'y lobber men no hittee use. T'inkse hap We Waillo, no unde'standle how him help glil out o' thuble. T'inkhi 'Melican man hap slid out hisself an' wait fo' cabtun. No catchee on glil hid top-side lock, wait fo' Dellinglee Deck. Him co-hom We Waillo lead him light t'heah. She say him no co-hom she go uppee flume. T'hat fo' why he chip in. Watchee say, eh, ch'hoy?"

"What do I say? You rascal! If you are lying to me I'll kill you before the morning star rises; if you are telling the truth I'll make your everlasting fortune, and send you back to the flowery land with a ship load of gold. Of course I will come. Lead me to her. Bless your almond eyes and celestial toes, the 'Melican glil' is Nita Browne—my wife."

"Hi-yah! So him t'ink! Dellinglee Deck findee allee lightee, an' We Waillo allee loundee ebley time. Lun, now; glil want chee bellee bad; if Kunlee Coldsteel findee, t'hat make um cake all dough. No moah chin-chin. Jest slide out."

And without a moment's hesitation Derringer Deck followed his strange friend.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CHINEE STRATEGY.

FOR some time We Waillo led the way in silence, except when he answered an occasional question of the man of the derringers. Though he followed a different line from that taken the night before Deck Bright had no trouble in identifying the route; in half an hour he had a shrewd suspicion of the locality for which they were aiming.

When they had fairly become entangled among the rocks We Waillo raised his hand and called a halt for the purpose of explaining the plan that he had to suggest.

Although his English was, for a Chinaman, of the best it may be as well to translate its import to the reader. To Deck Bright who had had much experience with the race, his pidgin English was plain enough.

In brief, We Waillo produced from under the rock where he had hidden it his own peculiar costume, and proposed that Bright should assume it before venturing further into the fastness. With some pride in his own lingual abilities he suggested that the only distinctive feature about himself was, or had been, his dress; and that if Deck Bright assumed it he would be able to pass unchallenged; or, if met, with the information that would be given him, he could throw the outlaws completely off their guard. At the same time he explained that while they were not ready for extreme measures he was, himself, an object of some suspicion, owing probably to his being suspected of tampering with some of the

spirits of Brad Awl, though how the discovery had been made he could not imagine.

Bright accepted the scheme without a word of demur. It was not that the disguise was altogether what he would have chosen; but in taking it he would receive with it points in regard to the outlaws' camp which, under other circumstances, the Chinaman might hesitate to give, and without which it would be hard to succeed in the work before him.

"Hi-yah!" he exclaimed, when he had donned the raiment that was decidedly skimp for a man of his size, "Me, We Waillo, onee shoot, 'way uppee, eblee time."

The real We Waillo grinned. In the darkness Bright made a presentable Chinaman, and his voice was like enough to deceive the unsuspecting. There was a promise of lively times ahead, and the Chinaman almost regretted that under his arrangement he would have to stay behind. He gave a little warning "hush," and then completed his directions. They were near the outpost in the pass, and after a little We Waillo halted, while Deck Bright went on alone. He had his derringers with him, and a pair of revolvers that the Chinaman had loaned him. With a good deal of confidence in his disguise, but more in his weapons, he struck into the darkness where might, for him, be lurking sudden death.

Before long there came a hail, showing that the sentinel was on the alert.

He answered it according to his instructions, and went on, hearing the guard blessing the Chinaman as he passed. Then he counted the steps, and after a little, turning to one side approached the sheer wall of rock at exactly the spot at which We Waillo had attacked it, and began the same perilous ascent. It might have been possible to flank the precipice and discover some more practicable point, but there was no time for exploration or experiment. Practiced mountaineer that he was, his progress though slow was sure.

After a time he found himself upon the plateau, and able to see something of his surroundings.

He made his way forward without hesitation to the spot where he expected to find the false We Waillo, and looked around him.

He saw nothing.

Then he softly called; but there was no answer. What had happened?

While he stood listening he suddenly heard a cry, as if of surprise, followed immediately afterward by the report of a pistol.

Guided by the sound he rushed forward. We Waillo had explained to him the secret of the cave below; and he knew where to find the rope. Without pausing to consider he flung it over the ledge, as the Chinaman had done the previous night, and then hastily began the descent.

Knowing the route he had no trouble in finding his way into the small cave used as hospital and prison-pen. When he discovered that it was empty he wheeled and started out into the little amphitheater.

A knot of men were gathered together around some object of interest. What it might be he hardly dared or cared to guess, since he had heard the sound of that shot. He slid toward the crowd in perfect silence, as it seemed to him; and for a moment his presence was not noted.

He heard exclamations that were more like those of wonder than of anger.

"Wal, dog-gone my tail-feather ef it ain't ther Chinee ag'in, jest 'bout ez limp ez he war las' night; an' him a-prancin' 'round hyer all day ez tho' he war squar' ez a white man. Shoot ther durned leetle cuss! He's a-playin' off some snide game."

"Ef not what war he a-shootin' fur when we found him out? Thar ain't no doubt he's been dealin' double, jest ez we s'pcioned; an' war goin' ter let us in fur all we're wu'th. Mebbe all Brad Awl 'll be on hyer afore we kin shake a stick; but ef they don't hurry up ther cakes they'll find this kid a-hangin' ef my vote kin pull ther string."

"Go a little slow, boys," interrupted a third, in evener tones.

"There seems to be something queer about this; and my advice is to wait for the boss. If there's any one can worm out what the heathen is up to it will be he; and it might make no end of damage to stretch hemp with him before finding it out."

"Bosh! Yer make more fuss over him th'n if he war ther Gran' Duke 'Lexis. Let us at him. I'm tired ov his monkey shines anyhow; an' it'll be wu'th a double-bar'led cussin' frum ther boss ter see him kickin'. Hyer's yer rope an' thar's yer victim; now let her went."

The voice of the fourth man seemed to settle the business. The members of the little knot crowded closer; all but the one who had raised the dissenting voice. He turned away, with folded arms—and came face to face with what in the dubious moonlight seemed another edition of We Waillo.

He gave a cry of surprise that immediately attracted the attention of the rest. They wheeled and stared.

"What fo' you talkee so fashion, go back on flin'. No hap got one piecee tololi blains in allo

him clowd. That tim' taipan come he maske too sick supposey he no find We Waillo. He say you belongee too much sasse, how you so flower heart! One tim' him flin', 'nother tim' no him flin'. No undestandlee, We Waillo lounde eblee tim'."

"Hanged if ther ain't two ov a kind," gasped one of the gang. "I move we hang 'em both."

The preliminary remarks of the new-comer were made without much rhyme; but they had some reason. His intent was to thrown the men off of their guard until he could see his way clear, and the effort was a decided success. Evidently they had no great respect for his prowess, while they were deeply puzzled over the masquerade. His scheme succeeded better than he hoped. Not a weapon was drawn, and the way was clear to the figure he could dimly see propped up beyond.

With a bound he reached it, and wheeling, faced the crowd.

"Hands up and fingers empty!" he exclaimed, as he seemed to cover every one of them with the derringers he had shaken from his sleeves. "I don't want to shoot men that may have been old pards, and that, anyhow, I have no quarrel with; but there'll be some empty skulls here if we don't come to terms. I'm ready for peace or war, and if you know what's good you'll vote for peace!"

"Upon my soul," said a man in response, as he stepped forward from an opening that led to the adjoining canyon. "This is a pretty kettle of fish. We've corraled the Spectacle Sport. Hold hard a moment then, boys, till we see what's the racket."

"If you're the boss I'll give it to you straight; but I'm giving it to you behind the muzzles that can back the words up with certain death. It was your Chinaman that got drunk in Brad Awl and tried to hold the town. I ran him off after they had the rope round his neck. I've got a Chinaman too, that's around looking after the interests of Miss Gordon. While your fellow was safe up here among the hills mine got into trouble and hurt down in town, and you carried him off by mistake. For what I did for him the real We Waillo helped me out of a bad box and put me on what seemed to be the best trail. You'll find us all square as they make 'em, and all I want is to take my friend and go. I'm a man that can keep his mouth shut and eyes open. If you don't believe it drop the hat."

Bright moonlight and deep shadow were not so badly joined but that, as he ceased speaking, he could see in his spectacles the form of a man slipping up behind, raising a pistol-weaponed hand as he came.

"Sorry for you, my friend, but you've got to drop," muttered Bright, between his clinched teeth, and throwing his hand back he fired to the rear without once turning his head, and the man went down just as, with a wild cry, a squad of horses came bursting from the mouth of the canyon.

"Hi-yah! Catch light onnee. We Waillo take him true eblee time. Him flin' 'way uppee!"

The Chinaman had in fact crept past the guard in the wake of "the boss," and swooped up the corral for a stampede. Led all abreast, We Waillo hanging low on the steed furthest from the little knot, they came directly toward the spot where stood Derringer Deck at bay.

So far Bright had not turned a second look toward the form that he had at the first identified as the mock We Waillo. Now he felt a hand touch his neck lightly; and heard a voice at his ear:

"Help me a little, Deck. It is our chance. The Chinaman is true."

For answer he swung his arm around the trim waist that was ready for his clasp, bounded to the horse that We Waillo directed toward him, and then the three went racing madly down into the darkness, followed by a shower of bullets.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BILLY BLOODTUB BRINGS A MESSAGE.

THOUGH Doctor Gordon's experience at Brad Awl had been rather tough, the town had really been on its good behavior ever since his arrival, until the evening he followed Colonel Thompson to Mulloney's and got in the way of Derringer Deck's bullets.

It was a chance shot that bit a little sharply and yet did scarcely any damage that might be called serious. After the first shock he felt none the worse while the excitement lasted—though he never lost his head in the highest of it. When Ante Pete came rushing through cloud and smoke he caught that young man by the collar, and forced him away from Mike's.

"Young man," he whispered, "there's no reason why you should be damaged. Take my advice and skip while the way is open. I will look after your friends. If he don't have a list of too many killed and wounded I think I can beg him off; and you can't help him now. Make an offing, and decide on your future course when you find how things have gone. Go now; I am safe enough, and lingering here will only make trouble for us all. I have an idea that Mr. Bright can take care of himself, without your assistance."

It was not certain that, unless he evacuated the camp entirely, Ante Pete would be any safer outside than inside of Mulloney's, yet the doctor had his way, the young man slipping off into the darkness, and so missing the climax.

In spite of the danger, however, he could not drive himself far away until he had learned, as he finally did, that in some unintelligible way the man of the spectacles had evaded the crowd and made good his escape. Then he thought it time that he too should drop out of reach; and when Brad Awl looked for him a little later he was not to be found.

His shanty was made an immediate point of attack and when it was found not only tenantless but stripped of everything of any value, it was shrewdly suspected that Ante Pete had hastily gathered up his penates and jumped the camp for good. There was a brief blaze, and then the crowd went on for further, though, as it proved, unavailing search. In the end there was an indignation meeting at which it was decided that the two men had forfeited their citizenship and were to be shot on sight if they again made their appearance in town. After that the evening exercises were over and Brad Awl lapsed into its normal disquiet.

The following day several scouting parties reported that no traces of the fugitives could be obtained; and it seemed about settled that they had taken the strong hint of the night before. A few were inclined to adopt the idea that they were hidden in the mountains, and might yet reappear; but the mass of the population scouted the belief, and only regretted that no effects had been found on which to administer.

Of course there were a good many people in the camp who had formed their opinion entirely from hearsay, and some, perhaps, had never heard the two derelicts speak a word in their lives; but it was remarkable how unanimously the verdict chimed in with what was known to be the opinion of Colonel Thompson. It was pretty evident that public opinion and his opinion were about one and the same thing.

If anything was needed to give Doctor Gordon confidence in his friend and backer this should have been sufficient. He said as much when the colonel called around in the morning to see how he was getting along. The injury of the night before had been even more trifling than he had supposed, and his head was clear enough for business—and anything needed besides.

"You are sure that those two strangers, who possess the remarkable name of Jawler, had nothing to do with the proceedings?"

The colonel was thoughtful for a moment over the question, and then answered slowly:

"It's worth looking after; but, frankly speaking, I do not think that either of them were concerned. I am inclined to believe that the Bender affair is all bosh, and that they are here for a totally different purpose, and with which the man in spectacles is not at all connected. Several of the loafers around town have been approached, and sounded about being willing to work in a claim, for good wages, where it might be that they would have to fight for their footing. They've got something in view, and I think it would be wise to know what it is before we drive them out. Of course, if they should turn out to be honest men, and all that, it would be to the interest of the camp that they should stay and succeed. Neither of them were seen about Mike's last night; and the younger man went to his bed at the Ark before the performances began."

"He was watched, then, was he?"

"He was watched," responded the colonel, with a gentle nod. "When a man becomes suspicious, in Brad Awl, he is generally watched."

"It's a funny thing to me, then, that you don't know something more about the villains that have made the repeated efforts to carry off my daughter."

"And who says that we know nothing? Do not be impatient. Sooner or later the truth will be known, and the guilty party taken. Meantime, the less that is said the better. I should scarcely have given you that much of a hint."

"Ah," said the doctor, "I understand, and I thank you. I cannot be frightened away, but I will sleep sounder for the knowledge. Between your vigilance and my good luck there will perhaps be, for the future, less danger, even, than I feared. And things are going very well. In a week or so I will run up a little castle, and have a picked body-guard. Mr. Early will attend to its selection from the best of the men we will put to work in the mine."

There was a little flame in the eyes of the colonel, as he heard this plan mapped out; but he held his head half-averted, and answered quite coldly:

"That is right, but meantime we will see after your interests. Remember that you can always count on me. I am aware that your daughter does not look upon me with a favorable eye; but I hope in time to conquer her prejudices. As I am old enough to be her father I can afford to wait—a younger man might lose his head and his heart altogether. You and I are too wise for such nonsense; but all the same

we can appreciate a noble-hearted woman when we see her."

"Yes, yes, she is a child yet, and down here you can't blame her if she seems exclusive while she is feeling her way. It will be different after a while."

"Oh, I have nothing to complain of. As I have not forced myself forward I have met with no rebuff. I am one of those who make their friendship slowly, but to last. I am only afraid that she may misunderstand my anxiety. It is not hard for one to be mistaken when they already have a prejudice. Our effort to have her looked after was rather a failure in one way. It brought to grief Jim Norris, who is a very worthy fellow in spite of his roughness; and probably precipitated the *emeute* of last night."

"So it did, I am sorry to say; and my daughter, with the perversity of her sex, seems to think that I ought to espouse the cause of her whilom champion. I begged to be excused, though I felt sure that we would scarcely see him again."

"One question, doctor; and it is only as an old friend, and on your account that I ask it. Do you think that your daughter cares anything for the man—in a sentimental sort of way, I mean?"

The doctor laughed.

"On that point I can reassure you. I know that she does not. She has even told me, though I cannot guess her authority, that he is a married man."

"Ah. That is singular. Has she not met him before?"

"Never, to the best of my belief; but a woman can obtain knowledge in ways that seem miraculous to the average outsider. And if the man has designs on any one I suspect it is I that he is after. Somehow I have a remembrance of his name. It appears to me that I have heard of a reckless gambler who rejoiced in the sobriquet of Derringer Deck—though I can't get over the impression that he was killed over a card-table. If there is a possibility that he has come to life this is the man."

"No telling, I wish we knew something more about your partner's antecedents. I am only just beginning to feel the responsibility of having brought you two together. I had an idea that you would succeed in buying him out altogether; but you seem to be taking the course to make him hold on. If he thinks you are at his call to furnish all the capital that he may hint as needed, he may sink a fortune for you. Not but what he is a good man; but he will bear watching."

"Thank you, colonel; don't be jealous. I will come your way soon enough. One thing at a time. When I get the Early Joe mine under development I'll have a few thousand left for something else."

"And I will put you in a way of getting ten for every one invested."

Then the colonel quit speaking, and looked up.

The two men were sitting in what might have been called the public parlor of the Ark, though it was a convenience insisted on by Thompson himself. Now a man came stalking in at whom the colonel stared with anything but admiration in his eyes.

"Mornin', pard's, I hope I see yer all a-bloomin'!"

"Thank you," retorted the boss of Brad Awl, sharply. "It's the proper thing to say; but we don't wish to hear anything about your hopes. This gentleman and I are having some private conversation, and of course don't care for an audience of strangers. You'll find a bar at the other end of the house, and it isn't far to Uncle Johnny's. I think you will be more comfortable somewhere else."

"Ef I couldn't be I'd go soak my head till it war soft enuf ter kick my brains out;" and the stranger gave a snort of disgust as he looked around the meagerly-furnished little room.

"Well, then, why don't you go? What do you want here? Who are you?"

"Billy Bloodtub be I, at yer service; an' I'm after Doc. Gordon. Which be he?"

"I think I recognize the man," began the doctor, with the old hesitation about him. "He is a new-comer that we have taken on at the mine. He probably has some message for me."

"It actooally does me proud ter hear yer shout. They're all down but nine, an' yer needn't set 'em up on ther t'other alley. Joe Early are waitin' fur ter see yer, an' requests ther pleasure ov yer presence. When yer arrove yer kin tell him I'll see him later. I've got in town an' I may ez well dress up fur ther 'cashun—pervidin' yer kin loan me a five 'til pay-day. I ain't ashamed ter admit I'm on bed-rock, 'thout a sign ov color."

"Thanks for your kindness; certainly, certainly!"

"Oh, you thank Early Joe. He said come, an' squinted over his sixes when I didn't move. I didn't want ter come inter yer durned ole burg, but ez Billy Bloodtub knows what's good fur him he ain't hankerin' ter go back till things be a leetle toned down, an' ef yer hev ther five handy—"

The doctor granted the loan with a readiness that should have endeared him to the heart of

the tough, though he manifested but little gratitude.

"Thankee," he growled. "Yer a gentleman an' a schollar—but I don't think much of Early Joseph. Ef, at any time, yer wants ter bounce him jest wink me a wunk an' you'll find Bloodtub Billy very much around. So long."

He slouched out without deigning a word to the colonel, who shook his head in a dissatisfied way as the man disappeared.

"I don't altogether trust that man," he began.

"Judge!" retorted the doctor. "He is all right and so am I. I suppose I know what is on the carpet, and I shall go at once. Will you walk alang with me a piece of the way? It won't be much out of your road."

The colonel arose, and together the two men quitted the Ark; while, from a distance, Bloodtub Bill watched them with an equivocal grin on his brutal face.

CHAPTER XXX.

EARLY JOE STARTS ABROAD.

THE events of the past few days had had their influence on Early Joe, and it had been for good. He had always known he had a good thing; but now he had reason to believe that capital, with which to develop, would not be wanting.

In regard to Lily Bascombe he was not so certain—perhaps he did not care as much as he had done a few days before. At all events he thought less of Jim Norris and the lady, and a great deal more of the miner. He had been fairly educated in his time, and a man of intelligence and good-breeding. It was astonishing how he felt the rough coating that he had accumulated in days of adversity dropping off, now that he had a better hope for the future.

He was thinking about all this as he turned his steps away from his shanty and toward Brad Awl.

"A married woman, and not too much in love with yours truly. Confound it, if things pan out according to indications, it strikes me that I had better wish myself well out of the mix. She would shine in a box at Frisco, and if she tied to a man fer good wouldn't make a half-bad pard to buck their biggest tigers; but to go abroad—it is barely possible that I've seen women would create more of a sensation, and perhaps hold their own a little better with the lords and ladies. I didn't think so a week ago; but then I didn't feel half so near to a million. What a fool Thompson was that he didn't come in himself, and play me square. I tell you, the doctor, soft as he speaks, can turn an eye like a gimlet when he wants to."

He passed a turn in the trail, and his shanty dropped out of sight behind, while right in front of him he had the prospect of a gentleman with a revolver, who undoubtedly held the drop. It was Jim Norris, and his intentions were hostile without a doubt.

"I'm sorry, Joe," was his salutation. "I'd like ter gi'n yer a longer string, but biz are beginnin' ter crowd, an' I cain't afford ter leave odd leetle jobs lay 'round ter git in ther way ov suthin' bigger. You got ther better ov me ther other night at ther scrappin' match; now we'll try it over with ther guns—an' ther advantago a leetle on my side."

"Don't be a fool, Jim Norris," retorted Early Joe, with thorough coolness. "We've had it out once, an' I orter got licked. Ef I didn't it war jest a chance, fur thar ain't much ter choose between us. I've found out sence then that I'd struck it richer ner I hed any idear ov, an' I can't afford ter be snoozin' 'round ter git up a racket with every man ez I thinks mou'n tramp on me toes. I kin tell yer now that it ain't likely I'll be in yer road soon ag'in. Ef I draw out, ez I'm goin' ter do, that'll make yer chances twicet ez good, pervidin' ther boys ain't lookin' fur you, an' kerryin' a rope et ther same time. Yer can't rub out a flourishin' mine-owner 'thout it's makin' it lively fur you when ther hands drop ter ther game."

"Tu thunder with ther boys; an' ther hands; an' you too! I ain't hyer fer chin, I'm hyer fer shoot. You an' me can't live in ther same deestrict, an' we're goin' ter settle which is ter be planted right now. I c'u'd drop yer whar yer stand but I want ter give yer some sorter show. I'll let yer git yer shooter out, so it don't never p'int my way; an' then we'll count three tergether. Arter three we'll fire ez we please."

"It ain't that I'm afraid, Jim Norris—I kin shoot ther boots off yer," slowly answered Early. "It's ther durned folly ov ther thing. You've met Leetle Lide this mornin', an' she's talked yer blind. It won't help yer chances ter hev shot Early Joe; an' I wouldn't add another man ter my record fur ther best woman that wears calico."

"That's enuf, Early Joe. Yer couldn't onstiddy my nerves ef yer chinned hyer all day—ner I ain't goin' ter gi'n yer a chance, either. Ef yer want ther show I gi'n yer, draw; ef yer don't, I'm goin' ter begin ter shoot."

Norris was actually trembling with rage, yet his keen eyes never left the face of his antagonist, and they had a malignant certainty in them that might have discomposed a worse man.

"That's enuf, too, Jim. I'll take me chances,

an' ther one ez fires fu'st after ther 'three' are apt ter kim out ther biggist jay-bird. He can't miss. Ready!"

"One!" said Norris, as he saw his rival's pistol out; and "One!" chorused the voice of Joe Early.

"Two! three!" rung out both voices, and then both pistols were jerked up, that of Jim Norris a little the quicker, and there were two reports that blended into one so nearly that only a spectator would have noticed the double discharge.

Down crashed Early Joe, the blood reddening through the little round hole in his shirt front, while Jim Norris, unhurt, coolly wheeled and walked away toward Brad Awl. His work then had been done, and Early had started abroad.

He lay there stiffening in the trail. The shots attracted no attention, since there were no listeners; and by a not unlikely chance no one passed that way for some little time.

Then a man came striding along toward the spot, and halted suddenly as he saw a body lying across his way. He stooped to examine, and then uttered a cry of surprise. Doctor Gordon had for the first time seen a corpse at Brad Awl, and it was that of his partner, Early Joe. He looked up again, and Laughing Lil sprung into view.

"Too late!" she cried, as she looked down at the body in the road, more pain than sorrow in her face. "I would have warned him, but I come too late."

"There has been foul play here of some kind. What do you know about it?" asked the doctor, as, with professional adroitness, he examined the body.

"You know as much as I. There has been bad blood between them, and no doubt they met here and this is the result. See. He had at least a chance for his life. There lies his weapon."

She caught up the revolver that had dropped from the nerveless fingers, and showed that one barrel had been recently discharged.

"The man must not lie here. Why did he come away at all, after sending me word to meet him at the mine? I will take him back there; and then I suppose there must be notice given to some one. Do they follow up such things here with a coroner, or do they just plant them and say no more about it?"

"The men of Brad Awl care little about such things unless they can see their way to making a profit out of them. Yet this is a different case from the most of such. There may be trouble from it. Are you sure you are safe yourself?"

The doctor stared at her as though unable to grasp her meaning; and then, without answer, he stooped, caught up the corpse, and flinging it over his shoulder bore it toward the cabin at the claim. There was no sign of repugnance in his face, and he carried the burdensome load with an ease that surprised Miss Bascombe, who followed, an uninvited attendant.

"What shall I do next?" asked the doctor, as he reached the shanty, and looking keenly at the girl.

"Examine your revolvers, and see that they don't have a double funeral and leave the mine without any ostensible owner. I can't get over the thought that danger to you lurks behind this."

"Nonsense! The man was my partner, and as far as our brief acquaintance could make him such, was my friend. They are more apt to connect you with it than me. And by the way, it seems to me from what you let fall you can explain the affair, anyway. You have more friends than the most in the camp, and your word would be taken without question."

"About some things, perhaps; but not about this. I shall mention no names. My advice is to go back to Brad Awl and stay there for the present; unless you are willing to slip away from here and find your way to Glory Gulch. I will do the best I can to protect your daughter, and send her to you. She may have a better chance to get away by herself than if you were with her. Yes, the last would be the plan if you had the courage to adopt it. Believe me or not, but to me it seems the only chance for you to get out of here alive."

She spoke moodily, and eyed him with a glance that he could not help but feel was full of suspicion.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he asked, abruptly. "What have I done that you should speak in such a way, yet show so little sorrow? Tell me the whole truth if you must speak at all."

"You are no fool; why then have you not taken warning long ago? If nothing can affright you it must be because you have some hidden hope and end. What is it? I doubt if you are worth the saving. If you had gone when Bender warned you Early Joe would have been still alive, and your daughter would not have the prospect of facing a howling mob."

"But Mr. Bender and the rest all said, as you do now, that I could not get out."

"Not by yourself; but with help it might have been effected. Now, call the men in if you can find them, and then be off."

There was nothing of laughter in her face, which had grown pale, and a dozen years older.

As if loth to leave her, the doctor hesitatingly turned away, and saw a man running down the trail, as though his life depended on it, heading directly for the spot. It was Ante Pete, who shouted, even before he reached the threshold:

"Ware hawk, doctor! There is a game afoot of some kind, and all Brad Awl will be out here in ten minutes. They say you have murdered Early Joe. Take my advice and run for it until the storm blows over!"

In the disguise he had assumed, Gordon did not at first recognize the young man; but without hesitation, though coldly, he answered:

"Then all Brad Awl is wrong, and I will right them. I have done no harm, and not a step from this spot do I stir."

CHAPTER XXXI.

WITHOUT MASKS.

MISS IANTHE was not aware that the doctor had left the Ark until some time had elapsed. When she made some inquiry, and found which direction he had taken, she considered for a little, and then left the building also.

No one appeared to be paying the least attention to her, as she strolled along, her steps by seeming chance turning toward the ruins of Edgewood's shanty.

She halted, and gazed carelessly at the few blackened embers. There was nothing to detain her there more than a minute, and she passed on, in what seemed to be a thoughtful mood, taking the direction followed by Doctor Gordon a little while before. Considering the experience that she had had, since striking the town, Miss Gordon certainly showed more nerve than judgment in risking a lonely promenade, that led her out of the camp, and along a lonely road.

Still she met no one, and was half-way out to Early Joe's before the idea seemed to strike her that she might be going too far for safety.

Halting, with an air of one suddenly awakened to her surroundings, she looked about her, just in time to see Colonel Thompson step out from behind a mesquite clump and advance toward her with hasty strides.

She recognized him on the instant, and looked at him with cold unconcern. Doubtless he had just parted from the doctor.

As he came nearer she saw that he was breathing hard, like one who had had a sharp run. Though he tried to steady his breathing it was some little time before he could speak at ease; and her steady gaze scarcely helped to restore his equanimity.

Yet he was as cool as she, for he did not attempt to speak until he had entirely recovered control of his voice. Then he dropped his hand, which he had held up in a gesture that meant she should wait.

"Go no further," he said, at length. "I am sorry to be the one that must say such things to you; but there has been trouble a little beyond, that has left a sight it is not best for you to see."

"A man killed, I suppose. Who is it? Not Doctor Gordon, I hope."

"You make the suggestion very coolly. No. It is not he; though, in the end, if he were here, friendless and alone, it might make him trouble until he would wish it was. It is his partner, Early Joe."

"You seem to have early knowledge of it; did you see the trouble, whatever it was?"

"From a distance only. If I had been nearer I might have prevented a deadly ending to the fracas. I am afraid there will be trouble about it; for if the man had foes he had friends as well, and they may choose to rake up the circumstances attending his death. If they do it will cause the air of Brad Awl to be very unhealthy, and I should say it would be better for both your father and you to be out of the way until all could be settled."

"Is the air of Brad Awl ever anything but unhealthy? They seem to do nothing here by way of amusement but lynch, or attempt to lynch. Two efforts at it have been made since our arrival, that I know of."

"But this one will be far more serious, if it goes on. Those were rather to drive obnoxious individuals out; but this will be business from the word go. I have already sent warning to your father; and, as I wanted you to waste no time in consideration, to you I brought the news myself."

"Exactly. You came to act as my guide. No doubt you can provide a place of refuge for us both until the storm blows over."

"You surprise me by your penetration. Such indeed was my intention. You have already had a chance to learn that even the Ark is no very satisfactory hiding-place."

"I understand—I think I have understood all along. Very well. If it is necessary I will go with you, though I think it might be better to make the stand here. To save time would it not be as well for you to open your budget, and let me know at once what are your intentions?"

"They are honorable, at any rate," retorted the colonel, stung by the coolness of the young lady.

"I should hope so. If they are not your preparations make everything a farce. Go on."

She spoke so scornfully imperative that he lost his hesitation in a flood of anger.

"You wish to know. Listen then, and I will tell you. It is hardly necessary for me to say who I am. All Brad Awl can tell you. I am indeed, a few years older than yourself, but the dissimilarity is not so striking. I have been used to good society, and I have wealth enough for two—or a dozen. It is good for neither man nor woman to live alone—why should we?"

Staring into his face Ianthe saw that he was even more in earnest than his words would indicate: but she only shrugged her shoulders and answered:

"Well?"

"You give me permission to speak and to explain. For that I thank you. I met your father by chance, and was attracted by the strength that lay behind the simple earnestness of his character. I gave him some little advice; and then, seeing that he was decided on coming here, I determined to do the best I could for him. At that time I had seen you; and that was all. To me you were no more than a girl, dependent on her father, who followed him into danger because she could not or would not cut loose from him. Now I know you better. You have courage, affection, and beauty. For all of these I have learned to love you. I want you to be my wife. Given that, and I can not only protect you both, but win your love by my devotion."

He spoke rapidly, almost angrily; and yet no one hearing him could doubt his earnestness. It seemed to impress Ianthe, who took a step or two nearer, bringing her in arm's reach; and her answer was in a low, intense tone.

"You speak with more confidence than I had expected. Have you forgotten the years that lie between us, or that I may have as much wisdom as courage? I must know your past before I can promise to be anything in your future. When I marry it shall be to build for all time; and though the king-pin of Brad Awl may be great in his present country, who knows what trail of wives he may have left along the road to the centers of civilization? I might possibly brook a sharer in a heart; but I never would another and a better owner of my name."

"Another man might be angry with your plain speaking; I am not. It gives me more hope than I had dared to have. I recognize the truth of what you say, and I am ready to lay bare the history of my life. You are wise and will not expect it to be a record of peaceful calm, but of one thing I can assure you—in all of it you will find no trace of a Mrs. Thompson."

"I should hardly expect to. If you were so clumsy a villain as that you would deserve hanging. The thickest of skulls contains sense enough to conceive a different name for every camp. What way are you going to take to convince me that you have not done the same?"

"You are a strange girl; though I admire you none the less for being such. I think my files of letters, the more important of which, for years back, I have preserved, will of themselves be sufficient for present purposes. You will find the same name on all of them."

"Then you are one of the best or one of the worst of men. I could hardly have believed it."

"Why do you look at me so keenly? Is it strange that I should have so far been able to prosper honestly? Or did you think that I had some wonderful mystery behind me? You show less of trust than I, since I have never once asked you whence you came or what had been your history up to the time of our meeting."

"Perhaps that is the reason why I am on my guard. It is but right that you should know more of the woman you have asked to be your wife—whether you wish it or not, you must hear."

"Wait. Have I asked you for any confidence? I know that I love you, and nothing that you can tell me will alter that fact. Why then darken counsel by words without wisdom?"

"You must be infatuated—listen to me. You think I am giving my life to my father; that I am risking myself in such harbors of cut-throats as Brad Awl through filial affection. It is false. It is all a sham and a lie. If he had held back I would still have come. If he had found no mission here I would still have made one. I am here for revenge, and to slay. Do you know a man named Walter Burt?"

She darted the words at him with a sudden, venomous change, and bending forward, looked him in the eye, while her right hand dropped into the pocket of her dress.

The name struck him hard. He staggered two paces back, while his face whitened, and for an instant his lips refused to move.

Then he gave a harsh laugh, and spoke in a voice that was more steady than his look:

"Why should you ask me such a question? I may have met the man, for I have known legions of people in my time; but I do not remember him now. What has he done?"

"It is false. You know the name but too well, and you are Walter Burt? See! The scar betrays you!"

Was it triumph or horror in her tones?

While she spoke she moved forward, her left hand suddenly shot out and seized his collar. One vigorous wrench, and with a tearing sound the cloth was rent away, laying bare his throat

and part of his shoulder, and disclosing a long, angry-looking scar, that had hitherto been concealed. There was a triumphant ring in her voice as she shouted:

"Deny it if you can and dare. No second look do I need. Only one living man is so marked, and that man is Walter Burt!"

There was a wonderful change in the face of the man who, in Brad Awl, was known by the name of Abner Thompson. He was no longer the ardent lover. At the unknown but no less certain danger that menaced him he became the hard, iron-nerved man of the mines, reckless and full of fight.

"Well, be it so. Suppose I am Walter Burt, what of it? Why should you hate me? No harm have I ever done to you, whose name, if it be not Gordon, I cannot even guess. Who are you?"

"Who am I? Ah, I am my mother's daughter. Why have I followed you here where the outer world with its law and its order seem but as a dream? I have come here because here my work can be done without that world being any the wiser. There are some crimes that must be avenged in darkness and silence, lest they stain an unsullied name. You and I alone will know that Mona Wayne was your bond slave, and that her daughter slew you. You wrecked her life; I will end yours."

"And you are Mona Wayne's daughter?"

He looked at her with more curiosity than alarm.

"Really, it is strange how nothing is lost. She used to worry about a child she had left behind her, but I never dreamed it could be you. How did you find it all out?"

"How? Because years after you had cast her aside she came to me and died in my arms; before dying telling me all the miserable truth. I made a vow then—how well I will keep it the end will show."

"That is right. A burst or so of passion will do you good. It seems to hang together pretty well; but I don't exactly understand why you put off the catastrophe to this late day. You had the chance at Glory Gulch; and vengeance such as yours is not apt to imagine it can keep."

He spoke mockingly now, and without a thought of denial.

"Because I was not certain that you were the man, though I believed that I knew your eyes the first moment I saw them. You miserable, scheming wretch! Your plans then were overheard; and when you vowed to carry me off and make your profit out of my ransom I vowed that you should carry me off, so that when I had stripped you of your mask I could slay you where you stood. If so far there has been failure on both sides it has been no fault of mine. Now, since some one else has taken a hand in the game, I dare wait no longer. With the mask off, it is time for you to die."

There was a low, jarring click as her fingers moved in her dress pocket; then the colonel laughed again.

"Scarcely this time. I will hereafter know better the kind of game to play; and if I fail I assure you you shall precede me out of the damp."

While he spoke, from behind, a pair of strong arms pinioned hers and wrenched her from the ground just in time to send the one shot she fired from her pocket high above Thompson's head.

"A miss are ez good ez a mile, kunnel, but it war a durned close shave. What shul I do with their female wild-cat?"

And the man who had come to the colonel's assistance, and who, at a signal from him, had taken a hand, looked up for an answer. It was Jim Norris, who had never wandered far from the scene of slaughter.

CHAPTER XXXII.

STEALING THE DROP.

COLONEL THOMPSON neither winced nor made outcry as the muffled report was heard. He simply gave a gesture and turned on his heel.

His meaning was simple enough; and, as he strode away Jim Norris followed with his lovely burden.

"Keep yer mouth shet," he growled. "We ain't keerin' ter take much stock in gals anyway, an' I sw'ar at ther fust yawp ter twist yer neck ez tho' it war a spring chicken's."

"You fool, you," she hissed. "No scene will I make, since this has been my aim. Go on. Sooner or later I will work my will, unaided and alone."

"By the way," said the colonel, halting suddenly, "if you are Mona Wayne's daughter, who is this Doctor Gordon? Scarcely your husband?"

"My father by adoption," snapped Ianthe; and the man, evidently struggling with some perplexing thought, again led the way.

Before they had gone far they were joined by two others—men who came silently in from either side. As their presence has not been explained it may be as well to say that they were two of the colonel's heelers, who had been on the watch while he sought the interview with Ianthe. At intervals they relieved Jim Norris of his load—for though she seemed so tractable they did not appear to be willing to trust her

with her feet on the ground, though at the first halt Norris had disarmed her of the weapon with which she attempted the secret shot.

Brush and bowlder hid them as they pushed along; and though a good trailer might have followed, the men did not seem to fear such a contingency, or expect to have a long or a tiresome tramp.

Just when they seemed to be fairly lost in the intricate wildness through which they were passing, they came to a little, low cabin, stoutly enough built to serve for a miniature fort.

Into this Colonel Thompson strode, followed by his men.

It was a desolate enough place, though there were evidences that it was used as a habitation. At the further end of the one room there was a rude fireplace, the smoke from which escaped through a narrow chimney. In the walls there were various loop-holes, from which a contracted view of outside objects could be obtained; but windows there were none. Unless a breach was made in the heavy walls, the only possible means of ingress and egress was the door through which they entered.

"Well, the bird is caged at last, and pretty much by her own folly," said Thompson, looking calmly at his prisoner. "After what I have learned the original plan will go on. I think Brad Awl is fixed, and that the worthy doctor will retire; but it is as well to be on the safe side. There are some doubtful elements lying around loose. If they were all combined they might make a strong team. I will leave you here, Norris, in charge—and Bud will stay with you—until I can see how things are going. Then I will come, or send you word, probably by Crooked Dan, here. If you get the word, be off to the retreat in the mountains, and wait for orders. The girl *may* be worth a little more living than dead; but kill her sooner than allow her to escape."

"Which way yer goin'?" asked Norris. "It may be we'll want ter find yer in a hurry, an' ther' won't be no time fur nosin' 'round."

"To Early Joe's, of course. Billy has given the alarm, and Chet has worked the case up. By this time half the town is out there—and the other half we don't want."

"A thunderin' sight ov trouble ther be, when two er three ov us c'u'd 'a' cleaned ther hull thing up, an' hed ther boddle 'vided, by this hyer time."

"Oh, yes, Bud; but you're one of the men that never look out for the hereafter. I'm not so sure that I want to leave Brad Awl. Joe Early's place alone is worth being an honest man for; and by the time we clean up the rest of the pickings we can say good-by to the—Ah, it is as well not to be too explicit until the fate of Miss Gordon has been decided. Keep a sharp lookout—though the racket at Early Joe's will draw every snoozer that might come along the trail. You'll hear from it soon."

The colonel waited for no answer, but, accompanied by the man he had indicated as Crooked Dan, sped away, taking the direction of the Early Joe claim.

"Sorry, miss; but yer heared that you war ov pertick'ler vally, so yer won't object ef we take pertick'ler keer ov yer. I don't intend ter sit hyer with paws on pistols tell ther kunnel gits back, so we'll jest tie up them slim leetle wrists ov yourn, an' put yer whar yer can't do no damedge."

As from the first moment that she knew her bolt had missed its mark, Ianthe submitted in dogged silence; and the work was gently but effectually done, and she found herself reclining on a rude pallet in one of the further corners of the room, utterly unable to move.

Leaving her thus, the two men went outside and stood in an attitude of listening. They were interested in what might be going on in the distance.

"It's 'bout time fur ther cirkiss ter strike up," said Bud, and he turned his ear to catch the faintest sound.

"Hush!" answered Jim Norris, in his husky whisper. "Ther cirkiss may be strikin' up a durned sight nearer home. Hands on yer barkers, an' keep yer ears open. I'll be with yer in a minnit."

Noislessly he darted into the cabin, but almost instantly emerged, bearing in his hands a short-barreled shot-gun.

"Draw yer hammers but don't shoot till yer hear my Gatling go off. You kin pick up the crippled she leaves. Half a pound of powder an' a peck ov buckshot orter jest salivate a hull gang. Sixes are good fur neat work, but I ain't takin' any chances. When I pull a good deal kin drop."

Bud made a motion to enjoin silence. His revolver was ready, and he could now hear quite plainly the sound that had attracted the attention of Jim Norris, even though it was made by a light footstep at some distance.

"He's comin' along, nose up an' tail out. It mou't be one ov ther boys; then ag'in it mou'tn't. I'll hev it ready fur him ef it ain't. Stand steady. Ef he comes inter ther open at that I'll hev ther drop on him at ten yards."

"An' put er peck ov buckshot in his bread-basket. Play ther game fur all it's wu'th. Hyer he be."

And at the instant, with gun up and finger on trigger Jim Norris shouted:

"Halt! Hands up an' fingers empty, er I pull!"

A man had leaped into the open, and at the challenge, coming from the side where least expected, he halted with wonderful suddenness. He had been more than surprised, and a single glance told him the gunner held the deadliest kind of a drop.

"'Melican manee fo' Joss sake go slow! We Waillo Kunlee T'oms'n fli'n' ebley time. Kunlee wantchee see him—hap heap big pidgin. Laise melly bobbely him shootee Kunlee T'oms'n fli'n'. Eh, ch'ho?"

"It's ther cussed heathen ag'in. D'ye want him, Bud?" said Norris; never, however, relaxing his vigilance.

"I thort he'd cleared out fur good. In course I'd like a shy at him; but there's something in what ther Chinee says. Ther kunnel talked forked lightnin' ther other time, 'bout my bein' in ther mix, an' I guess we'd better jest take his pop-guns—he kin be a desp'rit shuter when he walks on ther war-path—an' hold him over till ther kunnel gits back."

"That so ebley timee. Hittee use fu'st chop, ch'ho. We Waillo no t'ink-hi shoot; him fli'n' way uppe."

"Oh give us a rest with yer pidgin English. You make me tired. I've got yer kivered, an' I'll keep ye so till we hev yer irons. Ther fu'st crooked sign down goes yer meat-house. You just do it keerful, fur all I hev ter do are ter crook me finger—steady, now. Take yer shutters by ther barr'ls an' shave 'em butt foremost inter my pard's han's. Then you kin sit 'round till ther kunnel comes. Ef he don't want yer—good by, John!"

The Chinaman hesitated, as if not altogether understanding the order.

"Jump, quick! I'm gettin' nervous; an' ef me finger trembles you'll climb the golden stairs. Butts foremost—don't yer furgit it."

With ludicrous deliberation the hands went down to the revolvers at his waist, and drawing them slowly he presented them, one in each hand, with the muzzles pointing toward himself, while all the time the mouth of the terrible shotgun stared him in the face.

"Now step up, an' fork over."

He took a step forward and then—quicker than a flash the weapons turned around the fingers that had lingered in the trigger guard, the butts fell into either palm, and there were two sharp reports.

"Ah," said Derringer Deck, speaking from the Chinaman's clothes. "I frequently hold the drop myself. When I don't in the start I generally steal it."

To the two shots the two men had dropped.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CAMP CLOSES IN.

"THERE'S only one thing worse than shooting a man," said Derringer Deck, as he pushed forward after his two shots, "and that is, being shot yourself. That shotgun would have raked in a dozen if it had come my way; and it's mighty lucky there was a dodge in the drop line that they wern't up to. After my confounded carelessness I deserved to be taken in. Now, let's see what's the figure."

With scarcely a glance at the two pards who had fallen to his shots he passed on and entered the hut.

Not altogether to his surprise he found there Miss Gordon.

"Here we are again," he remarked, cheerfully. "You can thank the simon-pure Chinaman for it, though. He got his gimlet eyes on the affair in the trail and posted me when I came up, so I thought I'd see the thing through. What's next on the carpet? You've been getting me into no end of trouble; but I think I've explained it all square enough, and, in the words of We Waillo, I'm 'belley much loundee.'"

While he spoke, he was releasing Ianthe, who meantime eyed him with some doubt.

"Oh, it is I, myself; and you can thank your lucky stars it was the Man with the Drop. I've an idea you know how the land lays better than I. I came out from Brad Awl just behind the gang; and I'd have gone along down to Early Joe's at a respectable distance in their rear—they hadn't caught on to me yet—if I hadn't struck the Chinaman, whom I had sent on ahead. What do you advise?"

"Can I trust you?" she asked, looking keenly into his face.

"There and back again. Pierre Edgewood and I rode the same pony in Harvard, and when he met me prospecting around Glory Gulch and asked me to see him through the rifle, I showed him my hand and told him to put it there. Your fooling about at the Gulch gave us time to set up the game here, and no matter how you look at Pete we'll play it out till the last card is pulled."

"Then go with me to Early Joe's. We'll find Colonel Thompson there; and it is with him that I have business."

"All right. If I have to fight the town I'd sooner begin with the detachment there than any gang I know of. And by the way, if I should go out of the wet, there's a third We Waillo that I left back at Brad Awl—though by

this time I hope she has put some christianized garments on and left the camp. It's a wife of mine, who plays the very dickens when she strikes a jealous streak—but is a very good little woman to tie to. You will find her about nine miles out the trail to Glory Gulch, and can explain to her all about Ante Pete, then the sooner you two get out of this section the better."

Ianthe gave a nod that passed for a promise, and leaving the cabin behind them the two followed in the direction taken by Thompson.

There was not much conversation; yet as they went along, there were some few explanations that were needed to create a perfect understanding. After that they quickened their steps and were silent.

Meantime there was no disguising the fact that Doctor Gordon was in more than a little danger.

The warning of Ante Pete came too late to give him much start if he had thought of trying to escape; and to be taken was to have matters in worse shape than if he had remained and braved the storm. For that reason his resolution was as wise as it was courageous, and on an instant's thought Ante Pete admitted that it was so.

"All right, doctor," he added cheerfully. "I'm working on about the same level, and as you say you're willing I'll stay by you until the flood is over. For your sake I wish it was Deck Bright instead, for he knows four to one of me about fighting a crowd; but of one thing you can be sure. I'll be with you till the last horn blows. First and foremost; what is your plan for the battle?"

"If the crowd means foul play they will try to take me off my guard, and if they can get near I'm gone. I'll keep them out; and if they won't stay back I'll fight them as long as I can pull trigger."

"That is good enough; only it makes a row certain. Who killed Joe Early, anyhow?"

"That is more than I can tell. I found him lying in the trail, and brought him here. The woman known as Laughing Lil probably knows something about it, and from what she said I am inclined to believe that Jim Norris had a hand in it. She has slipped away I see; and it is just as well. I care little for what she can tell, and her presence would put me at a disadvantage. Here they are."

He turned to the door and faced the avant-couriers of the crowd.

The howl that they raised gave their intentions away. More than that, it furnished him an excuse for the very ground he wished to take.

"Hold on, gentlemen," he cried sharply. "I think I hear my name connected with some remarks. Stop right there till you finish them out. If you've come here to assist at the funeral of my partner I'm glad to welcome you. If you want to take Gordon on toast—I prefer not. Where's the man appointed to lead in the exercises?"

Chet Chenery came gliding forward with his silkenest smile.

"Don't labor under a misapprehension. Pretty much all of Brad Awl is here—I don't notice any of her tough citizens absent—but you'll find them square to a square man. In a case like this it is always best to have the decision of a coroner's jury at the time. It generally insures safety for the future, as no one cares to go back of the records. Early Joe was one of our esteemed citizens, and he can't be allowed to drop by the wayside without a thorough investigation, of the collateral facts. Of the base shooting we have been informed by an eye-witness. It is the extenuating circumstances of the case that we wish to be assured of. Do you catch on?"

There was a glibness about the festive gambler that might have deceived the simple-minded partner of the lately deceased Early Joe; but the sole proprietor of the Early mine appeared to be quite another person.

"I catch on—to my sixes, Mr. Chenery. The fact is that I know nothing about the death of my partner, as your eye-witness should have told you. I found him dead in the trail, and brought him here where he belonged. I don't intend that this court shall arrange for a vacancy in my executorship—as I have been warned it would. If you want to investigate to-morrow morning, on a square, rational basis, you will find me around. For the present this is a house of mourning, and if there is any intrusion the court will degenerate into a circus. How does that strike you?"

"It strikes me that you can't climb a town; and that if you know what is good for you you'll get off of that high horse and show your hand up."

"Chip first and I'll know better if it's worth while. I'm standing pat"—and he turned his face a little more to the crowd, and shaded his mouth with his hand as he added in a little lower tone—"on a pair of sixes."

"Don't be airish, my dear friend. Common sense ought to tell you that they're no good against a full hand like this."

Chet Chenery's fingers, in a sweeping gesture, pointed out the crowd of dark faces, and an affirmative roar indorsed his position.

"We have approached you in decency and

moderation; now, if you choose to defy the camp—git that Eli."

The doctor rather trusted to Ante Pete to guard against any flank attack; but the fact was that both of them were somewhat off their guard, expecting that the intention of the crowd would be developed in front. In reality, Chet Chenery's words were a signal. These desperate cases were no fonder of standing up and inviting possible death than the average man would have been, and as Chenery and others knew the shanty a good deal better than Doctor Gordon did, a plan had already been laid out.

At the signal half a dozen men sprung in from the rear, and though there was one pistol-shot, and a man down in less time than it takes to tell it, Gordon was dragged out from his intrenchments, a prisoner, just as Colonel Thompson came bustling up.

He seemed wonderfully excited at the prospect, and threw himself at once in the heart of the mob.

"Come, come, boys," he exclaimed. "This won't do. What is the meaning of this?"

A dozen voices rose in explanation, taking half as many minutes to give an outline of the feeling of the crowd.

"But the doctor is my friend, and I am pledged to look after his interests. You are certainly mistaken. The thing requires a regular court for investigation."

"A court it is, with Chet Chenery for judge; and Colonel Thompson for the prisoner. Come, you, hurry up the cakes. We want to git back to town."

"I'm counsel for the prisoner myself," exclaimed a voice from the crowd, and from the heart of it sprung a man with a revolver in either hand, who leaped upon those who were holding Gordon and struck blow after blow with the steel-bound butts.

It was boldness as much as strength and skill that made the effort successful, though the promptness with which the doctor moved rendered it more complete.

Into the shanty dashed the man who looked like We Waillo but spoke like Derringer Deck, pushing the doctor before him, and as he slammed to the door behind them he exclaimed:

"You've got Brad Awl pretty much all before you; now, Gabriel, blow your horn!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GABRIEL BLOWS HIS HORN.

ONE of the doctor's revolvers had been wrenched from his grasp and flung back into the shanty; the other had fallen before he had been dragged out. The result was he armed himself without any delay. Ante Pete, unrecognized, had received a heavy blow on the head, and now staggered to his feet. There were three resolute men in the shanty; and there would be no more surprises from the flank.

There was a shower of pistol-shots upon the cabin, but no damage was done; and in spite of Chet Chenery and the entreaty of Colonel Thompson a mad rush seemed imminent.

"Will we begin to shoot?" asked Derringer Deck, half-laughing, half in earnest.

"I'm afraid it's the only reason they'll hear to. We could run out a white flag and get them to talking; but they might fancy we were weakening and be ten times more set in their ways. Ah, what is the excitement now? Good heavens!"

No wonder the doctor uttered an exclamation of alarm.

There was a yell of delight, and then a swaying and a turning. Over three-score of men were there besieging the three; and they were men that it was hardly possible to get away from without an awful slaughter, even the idea of which made such a reckless man as Deck Bright hesitate. Now, two-thirds of the mob made a rush; and the next moment the cause of their delight was apparent.

Deck Bright had left Miss Gordon concealed at some little distance from the trail, while he could go on and see how the land lay.

He had not counted sufficiently on the impetuosity of female curiosity. In her anxiety to know the meaning of the sounds she heard she left her covert, and approached the seat of war. The howl that arose indicated that chivalry was in the minority; and that she was discovered and in some danger.

"Git back, kunnel, an' you, Chet Chenery, stand aside," said a burly-looking ruffian, as he forced himself forward; "you ain't ther kind ov men ter run this thing on its shape. It wants Billy Bloodtub ter take ther hand at ther helm. Don't yer move, er we'll mount *you*. Now, boys, we've got ther bulge on 'em, sure. Hand us yer rope, an' we'll begin with ther calico."

"And of that don't bring ther turkles outen ther shells we kin sit hyer till they starve. But keep outen range. Like ez not they shoot fur keeps."

The latter suggestion perhaps savored of cowardice, but it had its weight with the mob. Ianthe was drawn forward until just at the limit of pistol-range from the house, and a noose was flung around her neck.

Colonel Thompson was the most thoroughly be-

wildered man there. The presence of the girl was more than a warning. How had she escaped from the cabin and the guards? There was more going on than he had reckoned on, and he scented danger in the air.

While he was trying to consider he was silent, and meantime the men from Brad Awl were earnestly pursuing their avocation. In their present humor the rope around Ianthe's neck meant more than a threat.

"Now, gal, we've got yer father corraled in thar," growled Bloodtub, "an' we've got you in ther line ov death out hyer. Ef he wants ter see ye danglin' he kin stay thar an' we'll get him arterward. Are yer goin' ter bring him ter reason, er are yer goin' ter set out ez a pelegrim fur kingdom come?"

To the coarse suggestion she gave no answer. Her eyes were fixed upon the cabin beyond.

As she looked she saw three men spring out, and dash straight at the crowd around her, shooting as they sprung. The rash attack might mean death, but it showed that she was not deserted.

"Hyer they come," howled Bloodtub. "Now, boys, do yer duty. The gal kin keep. Sock it to 'em!"

It looked like utter madness on the part of the trio; but what else was left for them? The distance was not great, but a running man offers an unsteady mark for any but experts; and abreast they charge the crowd, coming a shade sooner than they were expected.

Ianthe was not unmindful of her own chances. When those around her turned away hastily to what seemed higher game, she bounded from the spot.

Only, she did not attempt escape! but threw herself toward Colonel Thompson, who, true to the plan of keeping a clean record for the future while his tools did the cruel work, stood with folded arms but a pace or two aside from the surging crowd. When he felt a clutch upon his shoulder and looked around with a start he was gazing into the muzzle of a derringer in the hand of the desperate girl.

"Ah, you thought you had disposed of my life for good. Poor fool! If I was in my grave I would rise for vengeance when you passed by. I know you as you are and in another moment my bullet will be in your brain. Would that I could prolong your agony; but I dare not run the risk of losing all. Die!"

As she spoke she pulled the trigger, there was a stunning report, and Colonel Thompson staggered back—unhurt.

The bullet whistled high overhead as a stout hand knocked up her arm and then shot on for the colonel's throat, while Ante Pete, coming also, drew her a little aside, and the doctor fastened to his quarry with the grip of death itself.

"Hold on, there!" he cried, as seizing the unguarded throat with one hand with the other he dashed the barrel of a cocked pistol between Thompson's teeth. "Let up, or you'll have one dead man, sure. Fire if you want to; but, hit or miss, I've got him sure. The first shot at me or mine brings his death."

He had run the colonel a little further away, and now his friends, with their shoulders to his, were ready to stand or fall with him.

"Don't be too previous, gentlemen. I'm here on business and the men that bother with me will find the whole United States army at my back before they get through. There's some white men in this crowd; and I'd advise them to fall aside and show just who are this Colonel Thompson's pards. Whoever they are I want to scoop them in. *They* are the men that have been masquerading with him as Colonel Coldsteel's Lucky Seven; and I am a Government detective after the men that have been robbing the mails. I've got the head center; and I'll have the rest before I'm through. Who wants to be pulled along with them? Hark! There comes the cavalry now."

From the mountain-side beyond rose the sound of scurrying and clattering hoofs, but it did not produce half the effect of the sudden change in the doctor and his bold charge. There were very bad men there, but the majority of them were not road-agents.

The colonel remained quiescent.

He could not speak, and he dared not move. True or false, he had to swallow the charge until some one came to his rescue, for he was not reckless enough to care to run the almost certain risk of instant death. His friends saw the dilemma as well; but no one of them save Chet Chenery had an idea of what to do.

On his features there came a scowl as he noted that the words of Doctor Gordon had had an effect; and that many of the outsiders were inclined to hang back: while he could not even guess what force was coming. He did see that if he was to act he must act quickly, and he sprung in front of them all.

"You idiots!" he exclaimed. "Are you going to let these cut-throats bluff you off with a lie like that? He dares not harm the colonel, for that would insure his death; and sooner or later he must give in. Bloodtub, you and half a dozen of the boys go up the trail and see who comes. Drop them if they won't stop. I'll attend to this frolic here."

Bloodtub, with suspicious readiness threw up his hand by way of signal, and started in the direction indicated, followed by a little knot of men; while Chenery turned to the doctor.

"I'm sorry that you have chosen to defy the camp, for it will do you no good. What was at first a simple movement for justice may degenerate into brutal vengeance. The advantage obtained by surprise cannot last; and you are bringing ruin on not only yourself, but those who profess to be your friends. Your wild charges of course go for nothing. If you care anything at all for your daughter you will accept our terms. The young lady can go to Brad Awl—escorted by your friends if you so prefer—you must deliver up your arms and submit to an investigation. If it turns out that you are innocent in the matter of Early Joe's death, what has occurred since goes for nothing. If guilty I can assure you of speedy execution. Those are the terms; and they are the best you can do. You are no better off than you were when entrenched in the cabin—not so well. If you don't accept—Colonel Thompson's life may be sacrificed, but there will be a terrible revenge."

There was nothing genial about the gambler now, though he spoke slowly and with distinctness. If tones went for anything, he meant to kill, though his hands were hanging carelessly at his side. In fact not a weapon was leveled, though more than one hand grasped a revolver or a knife.

"And Chet Chenery, when the circus opens you will be the first man to drop," flung back Derringer Deck, who for a time had been silent. "There are three men here who are good for thirty; and when they get through with them they'll be ready for the balance."

Even as Bright spoke there was a sudden change that was entirely unpremeditated on the part of any concerned. Gordon's fingers had gathered in tighter than he knew on Thompson's throat, and suddenly the worthy colonel collapsed, dropping away from his hand, nerveless and almost dead.

As he fell there was a chorus of shouts and the rattle of firearms from the trail above, telling how Bloodtub was at work, while, as if by magic, two revolvers appeared in Chenery's hands. He jerked up one, and his fingers were already ready on the trigger when, from his rear there came a report and the gambler pitched headlong.

Amazed and confused, the crowd, or a good portion of it, looked backward, and then a wilder cry than ever arose.

Laughing Lil stood there, pale though firm; and with one arm twisted around her, and one hand by his side, grasping a navy-six, stood the supposed dead man, Early Joe. Those nearest to her heard her mutter:

"Not by your hands, Joe; thank Heaven, not by your hand."

Billy Bloodtub and his contingent came rushing back over the cord of the curve, just in time to get in the range of Derringer Deck's pistols, and the traitor went down to his first shot just as, with a wild hurrah, the horsemen rode in at a gallop, each shooting as he came.

The worst of the bad men from Brad Awl were hard hurt; a sudden panic seized the rest. They ran down the trail toward the town, leaving their dead and wounded behind them.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SCATTERING SHOTS.

SOME of the horsemen followed the fugitives, but their leader prung from his horse and stepped boldly toward the doctor and his friends.

"Well, old man, I should say that, for a guileless tenderfoot, you've held your end up about as well as they generally manage. Hands on the board, now, all fair and square—what's your game? If you are pulling my chestnuts there is no use for my chipping any heavier than I can help."

The speaker was Sam Jawler; at his shoulder stood "Gentle Annie."

At sight of them Derringer Deck frowned and looked anxious. He had but lately escaped from these men and he scarcely saw how it could be peace, yet something admonished him to hold his hand. The doctor came to the front once more.

"You told me some time ago that you were looking for one Walter Burt. I was afraid to trust you then; but I will have to now. Here he lies under my fingers; and they don't leave him until they turn him over to the halter. He wronged one Mona Wayne, a handsome enough widow when she first met him, with wealth to boot. He made her his wife, to be sure, but he crushed to the last gasp the life out of her, and then left her stranded in the asylum where the daughter yonder found her. I had been on his trail myself—the detection of crime and criminals is my trade—and she came to me to hunt him down for her."

"Chance threw us on his trail, and we came up with him in Glory Gulch, though so well was he disguised that we could not be sure. Yet we were willing to put our heads in the lion's mouth to know; and when Ianthe overheard him plot-

ting with Chenery, she saw her way to certainty through a dreadful risk. I had never intended that he should die by her hand; but I was willing that she should learn the whole truth. After that, if he was the man, the rope would give her all the vengeance she needed. I intend to take him back—do you mean to try to hinder?"

"Heaven forbid, if you have a sure thing of it. I've hinted what I felt for Walter Burt, and besides—well, I have other reasons not necessary to mention. Tie him up to keep, and let us look around. There's a good bit of damage been done in a short time, and it might be as well to try and repair some of it. What was all this racket about, anyhow?"

"They charged me with killing Early Joe; but he seems to be very much alive, and I think it was a job set up on him by Burt, anyhow," answered the doctor; and as Jawler laughed, Derringer Deck slid quietly to his shoulder:

"And how do things stand between you and me, my festive friend? It strikes me that after the way you hustled me around last night, I might begin to suspect; but I'm an innocent cuss, and want to get your word for it."

"If you and yours hadn't put yourselves in the way, you wouldn't have that question to ask. By good luck you only creased Annie, so there's no bad blood between us. I meant to block the colonel's game, because I couldn't see what was between the lines, and I meant not to harm the girl, but through her to lure him on to destruction; but it may be better so."

Then all the laugh suddenly went out of his face and he looked into Bright's eyes, his own shining like fire.

"The doctor is a thief-taker; I can't trust him, but I'll take your word for all I'm worth. By heavens, that man, whom I am now sure is Walter Burt, made a convict of me when I was innocent as a lamb, and for three years, behind the bars, I swore daily I'd have his heart's blood—yet now I'd sooner a thousand times have him HUNG. Swear to me that he shall be and I'll let him go. Refuse, and I'll shoot him where he stands. No man shall carry him beyond my vengeance."

"I'll give you my word," began Bright.

The smile came back—if it was by an effort.

"Good enough. Then we can be friends. I had no plan against your masquerading wife—though of course my boys could not tell what all was behind. It was my Chinaman I was wanting. He knew too confounded much. I started to wring him in on the colonel, but I'll be blanked if I didn't suspect he was going to work on the other level."

"And Gentle Annie, and the prisoner business, and all that? Is he your brother?"

"No, but it's all true about what I can do with him and it was square work all, only—there were two Coldsteels, and it was my men trussed me up for Annie (whom they don't know much about) and you to find. They overdid it a little, and the rest was good acting, you understand. I can give you points on him and then when *yonder* fraud turns toes up to the daisies I'll have been hung again. I didn't intend he should ruin my life; and then make me out worse than I am by having me shoulder his misdeeds as well as my own."

"Then he has been playing the game of hands up?"

"You bet he has—he and his gang. Why confound 'em, the way they've been scooping in the tenderfeet they didn't leave a chance for honest men to do business. When I heard of it all and knew who was at the head of the gang, I brought the boys around to lay for 'em, and as he kept his own precious head pretty well out of danger I thought I'd come into Brad Awl with fair recommendations. That was the reason you found me as you did. Now, hold on. We'll see what's on the carpet, and when things get cleaned up a little we'll give a look at the lay-out. I see the doctor has put the irons on and has gone on to the rest of the patients. I don't believe Brad Awl will bother for a little; if it does the boys will be ready for them till we can chip in. Let's see what's the matter with Early Joe."

The return of Early Joe from his foreign trip was the surprise of the season; and it was by no means certain that he would not yet climb the range and go on. Certain it was that it was one of those miraculous cases that do not occur more than once in a year, in which a man shot through and through and picked up for dead, has constitution enough to recover his senses and pull a trigger.

Laughing Lil was bending over him, listening to what he had to say:

"Don't worry over me, Lil. All things are as they are, and so they ought to be. I deserved it. I was just thinking I could break it all off and go abroad alone when Jim Norris dropped me. I couldn't go then till I came back and told you what a mistake I'd made. Ah, I can't go alone."

"If you go now, you'll find Jim Norris somewhere on ahead of you," said Bright, leaning over the wounded man. "I found him in mischief and cleaned him up. But I think you're not elected this time. Miss Bascombe never speaks unless she says something. If she'll do the nursing you'll do the getting well."

"You'll stay by me, won't you, Lil?"

It was not certain that the man was not dying, but the woman, with the deliberation that was natural to her in her sober moments, hesitated to answer. She turned from Early Joe, to look inquiringly at Sam Jawler.

"I'm the doctor, am I? Well, Lily, if you want to, I should remark—there's no reason why you shouldn't, since the young man you are thinking of has gone up the golden stairs."

"Not dead?" and her eyes wandered almost imperceptibly toward where Chet Chenery lay.

"Yes, very dead. If you did not care to pose as a widow you might say nothing and I'd never tell."

He winked slightly as he spoke, and she half smiled, though immediately afterward her face grew very white.

"Dead—and by whose hands?"

"Again, I'll never tell. Wait and maybe you can find out. I'm glad I can say, not by yours. It would have made a bad stain for you to have reddened your little fingers with even such very worthless blood as that of your discarded husband. Miss Bascombe is my cousin, gentlemen. Although we don't see each other very often we manage to speak as we pass by."

Pierre Edgewood—or Ante Pete as he had been called in Brad Awl—was too busily engaged talking reason to Miss Gordon to hear much of this; while the doctor's attention was occupied with the wounded who appeared to be in salvable condition. As for the dead, after the first inspection they lay where they fell. It seemed very much as though the smile must all along have been a mask, so very serious was the face of Lily as she laid her hand on the shoulder of Joe Early:

"I will see that if kind fingers can bring you back to life and strength they shall not be wanting. After that—who knows? You may want to hear something more of the woman who has been more sinned against than sinning, and who has found but one honest friend outside of her own family."

Early Joe caught her hand and drew it down to his cheek, just then he wanted to hear no more, and the future was uncertain.

"Now then, doctor, what's your next move?"

Gordon had come back from his rounds, and stood over the man whom he had beaten at his own game, and who was just beginning to recover from his deathlike swoon. He looked up at Jawler keenly.

"I believe I can trust you. My next move is to get Ianthe and my prisoner back to Glory Gulch. The procession has got a little ahead of the hearse or I would have my partner here to help me out—next week he would have been down with half a dozen good men. Now, I suppose I had better make a break of it before the camp comes to the rescue."

"Good enough. If you choose to accept the favor I'll loan you mounts for the scurry over the mountain, and a couple of us will go along. I'll bet high you'll find the road clear of agents; but as I can't say so certain that Brad Awl won't crack on steam in pursuit, it won't hurt to have an extra pistol or two around."

"And where do Deck and I come in?" queried Edgewood, "to say nothing of Mrs. Bright who is back in the clutches of those hounds. Are you going to freeze us out? Because if you try that game Ianthe and I will claim your prisoner, and you can amble on alone. We've had a hand in the circus so far, and we propose to keep the company together or hang on to the spoils."

"Don't be alarmed about Mrs. Bright," interposed Derringer Deck, with his customary confidence. "You will find her 'alle leunde,' if I'm not very much mistaken. We'll meet her on the direct trail from Brad Awl to Glory Gulch, and about nine miles out. That was what I suggested, and as she always has a penitential fit after one of her masquerades she'll do it if it takes a wheel off. That far Pete and I can scramble on foot if the wu'st comes to the wu'st. There remains the chance that she will come direct to the scene of action."

"I hope she will either come soon, or go the other route. I would sooner not waste time here. One prisoner in hand is worth a round dozen in the bush, and I want to get him away as soon as possible. I don't want to leave anybody; but I tell you I came here for Walter Burt; I've got him; and I intend to keep him. We'll leave Early and the claim in the charge of the young lady, and when I come back I'll bring force enough to hold on. This, gentlemen, is my last job of thief-taking. I've got an undivided half in the biggest bonanza of the season."

"Hallelujah!" laughed Jawler in Bright's ear. "That leaves a chance for me—unless he thinks he has me already, and included me in the present job."

"See here, are you road-agent or detective? Either way I'll treat you square for the good you've done; but I want to know where I stand."

"A little of each," was the cool answer to Bright's question. "But I've half-made up my mind to retire from both professions. Hark! There is trouble down the road. Let the doctor pull out and we'll go see. We must hold the fort."

Below them they heard half a dozen straggling shots.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CURTAIN.

MRS. BRIGHT had a habit, when left behind by her husband, of not staying left. She had made certain changes in her costume, but instead of then taking the direct road for Glory Gulch, she mounted the mustang ridden by her from the outlaws' camp, and turned his head in the direction of Early Joe's cabin. When half the distance had been covered, she came upon We Waillo, standing in the trail and holding two horses.

In a few words he told her that Bright had left him there, while he went on an exploring expedition, telling him to wait for his return. While he was speaking, they heard the report of Bright's revolvers, as he stole the drop from the men at the cabin.

At once Nita plunged toward the sound, followed by the Chinaman. Perhaps the echoes of the shots were deceptive—it was some little time before they found the spot; and by that time they heard the tumult of the battle going on at Early Joe's.

Leaving the evidences of Bright's handiwork behind them, they started in the new direction, and again their progress was slow. Brad Awl was in retreat, and rushing down the trail as they neared it. They would probably even have gone by had it not been for an unfortunate chance.

Crooked Dan had passed unscathed through the fight, and led the retreat. He even succeeded in getting so far in the advance that he was able to dodge to one side without being seen. As he headed for the spot where he had left the prisoner and her guards, he suddenly came face to face with a woman on horseback, who rode at him without hesitation or fear.

He thought of one woman only—the prisoner—and the orders to kill her rather than to allow her to escape. His hand went up.

Before he could pull trigger, his head went down.

"Hi-yah!" exclaimed the genuine We Waillo. "Chinee loundee top-side, eblee time!"

The shot cleared the road of the immediate enemy—it blocked it further on. The panic was about over, and when two riders dashed out into the trail they were met by a prompt order to halt.

And that was the cause of the rattle of firearms heard by Sam Jawler and the rest. With their revolvers they cleared the way, and the warning cry of Derringer Deck and Jawler came just in time to prevent their receiving the fire of Jawler's men beyond as they burst through.

"I told you so," said Bright, "and it's only another proof that whatever a woman does is right. All together now, hadn't we better move over the mountain?"

"An' what yer goin' ter do fur me—copperheads an' coal-ile, yes? I hed ter take a hand an' it war me ez plugged Chet Chenery. Ef I stay hyar Brad Awl'll hang me; ef I go erway whar'll ther millyun kim in at ez Sammy an' me are goin' fur. Oh, you men are solid, an' ain't goin' ter shake a poor ole cripple like me?"

The judge came skulking out from the cabin, pistol in hand. Miserable-looking old scallywag though he was, he told the truth. It was his nerve in dropping Chenery just at the critical point of time that had insured the victory.

"Billy," said Jawler, looking him over, "you've a healthy appearance for an heir to a million, but what I told you is all frozen truth. I can't go back with you—I just threw up on the Eastern climate as too unhealthy a few months ago—but I'll give you the points, and start you on your way from Glory Gulch rejoicing. Now we'll say *au revoir* to Early Joe and draw up in line for retreat. When the doctor comes again I've no doubt he'll make Brad Awl hum."

He gave a peculiar whistle and one of his men appeared almost instantly at his side.

"Johnny, I'm going to leave you a little in charge here. Gordon, who seems to be as good a doctor as a detective, has fixed up Early for the present, and to-night if no one turns up, you can watch him while Lil goes in for Doc Candy. The drunken old brute will be just at home with such a case, and he can see that some one comes out to help take care of—"

"An' be ther powers, it's mesilf that is round an' will do that same. Oi've done ther square wid ther grrul so fur, an' devil a bit will Oi lave off now. Oi've bruk' wid ther gang, an' kim or ter say fair play. Sure, phat yer starin' at? It's Mike Mulloney ez is a-talkin'."

The reckless keeper of the saloon and gambling-house had managed to slide into their midst before his presence was suspected; but he came in such peaceful shape that he was more than welcome, and his offer was the solution of the one difficulty Jawler felt about leaving.

"You're a brick—shake, old man!" said Sammy, and the hands of the two met in a friendly clasp that bound the bargain.

"Bizzniss is bizzniss," said Mike, "but it never made me loie over me hand. Yez kin thrust me thar an' back ag'in. Be off wid yez afore there's moore thrubble with ther b'yes."

"Good enough," answered Jawler, and in five minutes more the sound of the last hoof-beat

was heard no longer, and the cabin was untenanted, save by the wounded man and his two watchers.

The actual work was over; the rest was mere exercise—so far as affairs at Brad Awl went—and time does not permit the tracing to the end with more minuteness the fate of all the characters who took part in the drama played there immediately preceding the fall of Colonel Thompson. A few words will outline all that the reader will care to know.

Ianthe left her vengeance in the hands of Gordon and the law, and Walter Burt felt it fall to the full as heavy as if her hand had struck the blow. As the adoption by the doctor was only for temporary purposes, she did not ask his blessing when she decided to say yes to Pierre Edgewood, though she received it all the same, before he went back to develop, along with Early Joe, the biggest strike in the district. Some day Early may go abroad, not in the spirit but in the flesh, and if he does he will not go alone. When he goes, Laughing Lil, once juggler, ventriloquist, actress and card sport will no doubt hold her own with the lords and ladies quite as well as her own liege lord and master. Though she did not pose as Chet Chenery's widow, yet she told Early all the truth, and in the future he will never doubt her.

Daddy Bender started on the trail East. By that time he had changed for the better, and reports have come wandering back that the worthless bummer of Brad Awl actually obtained the fortune that he heard of in so strange a way, but there seemed to be no certainty about it. Brad Awl lies far away from New York, Sam Jawler was the only man in all the West knowing the exact truth, and he was not about Brad Awl to tell.

Jawler and his strange pard—for Ananias was not his brother, strange as was the influence possessed by the one over the other—disappeared from that region. The doctor was pretty certain that he had had his hands very near the original Colonel Coldsteel, but was satisfied with his triumph over the man who had used the name as a cloak for his own misdeeds. The Chinaman disappeared with the Jawlers. He had enough of Brad Awl; when he tried to carry water on both shoulders, and though acting under orders from both sides. Perhaps Jawler trusted him all through; but Jawler was not always around, and the rest did not. Perhaps elsewhere and under a different name they were heard from, but Brad Awl knew them no more.

The Brights went back to a place called Bunco, where Derringer Deck had interests that were worth looking after. After all, the strange pair were not badly assorted. Chance had brought them together, then thrown a seemingly awful wall between them, and then once more reunited them. Not knowing their own names for years they had had others that did just as well, and whether the lady had truthfully believed at times that her name was Nita Gay Tosola, Ethel Farrell or Mrs. Bright, at Bunco she was known as Mrs. Browne. Whether they remained there, there is no means of knowing, for the curtain is down, the music has ceased, and the reader has reached

THE END.

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